

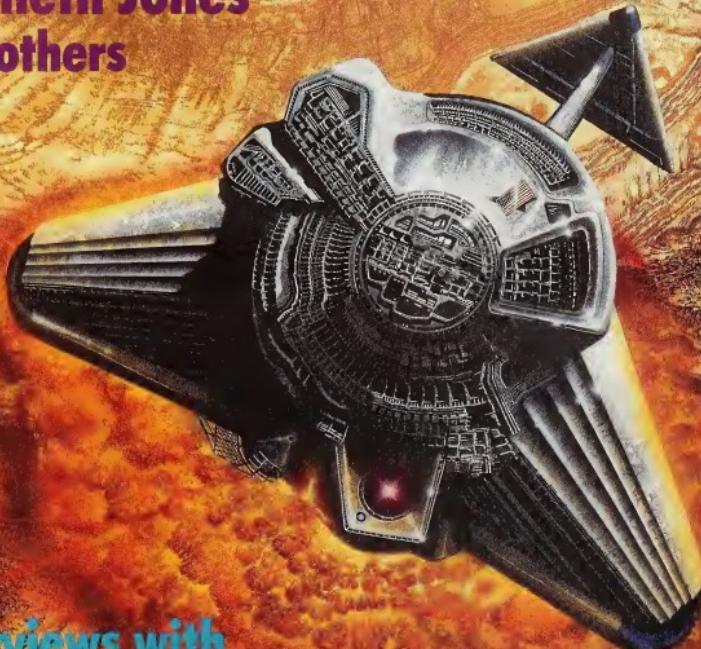
# interzone/62

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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

AUGUST  
1992

New stories by  
**Brian Aldiss**  
**Barrington Bayley**  
**Terry Bisson**  
**Gwyneth Jones**  
and others



Interviews with  
**Garry Kilworth**  
**Michael Swanwick**



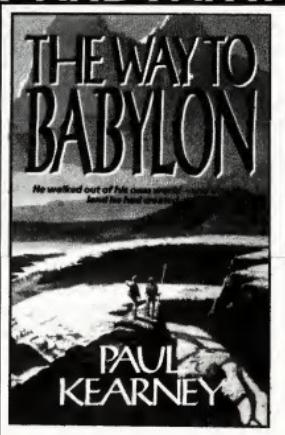
# GOLLANZ

## FOR THE BEST IN SF AND FANTASY

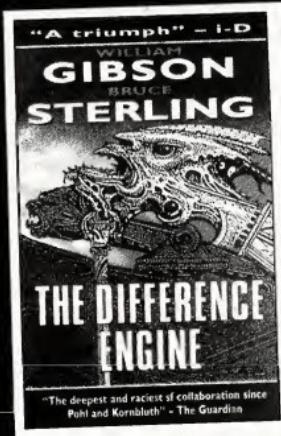
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# interzone

SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 62

August 1992

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# Interface

## David Pringle

We are entering a rich period for first sf and fantasy novels by new British and Australian writers. Already out so far in 1992 are *Correspondence* by **Sue Thomas** (Women's Press), *And Disregards the Rest* by **Paul Voermans** (Gollancz), *Hot Head* by **Simon Ings** (Grafton) and *Jizz* by **John Hart** (Black Swan); and coming up imminently we have *The Way to Babylon* by **Paul Kearney** (Gollancz), *Meridian Days* by **Eric Brown** (Pan) and *Quarantine* by **Greg Egan** (Legend). Slipping into the earlier part of 1993, we have *Ammomite* by **Nicola Griffith** (Grafton), *Mindstar Rising* by **Peter F. Hamilton** (Pan), *Dead Girls* by **Richard Calder** (Grafton), *Scrotch Monkey* by **Charles Stross** (Orion) and *Imperial Light* by **Mary Corran** (Orion). That's a dozen new London-published novelists, ten of them British, two Australian, about half of them Interzone "discoveries." Good going!

And another of our popular contributors, **Ian R. MacLeod**, tells us that he has just finished his first novel: probably, he will have found a publisher by the time these words see print (rumour has it that editors are scrambling over each other to see the manuscript). No doubt there are other new novelists we don't know about — apologies for any unwitting omissions in the above list. So, you see: despite recessions, worries about "post-literacy" and suchlike general doomsaying, it is possible for new writers to make the breakthrough to book publication — especially in the ever-active fields of sf and fantasy.

### IZ Subscription Campaign

During the month of May 1992 we utilized our Arts Council "incentive funding" grant to send out more than 100,000 leaflets to other magazines' subscribers. (I mentioned this campaign in the letter column of Interzone 59; in the event, it was delayed until after the British General Election.) The magazines in which we placed the leaflet were New Scientist, Times Literary Supplement, Times Higher Education Supplement, New Statesman, London Review of Books and British Book News.

At this time of writing, several batches have still to go out — to the subscribers of Gronto, Writers' Monthly, Literary Review, Topical Books, Modern Review and sundry others. Already, though, we're pleased

to report that we have taken over 200 new subscriptions as a result of the campaign — and it's still early days: we hope to double that figure, at least. So, welcome, all new readers who have joined us in the last issue or two! (And all thanks to our generous patrons, the Arts Council.)

### Nebula Awards for 1991

Winners of this year's Nebula Awards for best science fiction (as decided by the membership of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers of America) are:

Best novel: *Stations of the Tide* by **Michael Swanwick**  
 Best novella: "Beggars in Spain" by **Nancy Kress**  
 Best novelette: "Guide Dog" by **Mike Conner**  
 Best short story: "Ma Qui" by **Alan Brennert**

### Ansible Link

Some of you have heard of Ansible, a legendary though well-nigh invisible news-fanzine produced by the Hugo Award-winning **David Langford**. Others may have had contact with "Ansible Software," a small company run by Messrs Langford and Priest. Now, at long last, Ansible comes to the pages of Interzone: Dave Langford, who has written occasional articles for us in the past (not to mention some excellent stories), joins us as a regular news columnist from this issue — see his "Ansible Link," page 57. We welcome him, and hope that readers will enjoy the news and gossip he has to pass on.

(David Pringle)

## Interaction

Dear Editors:

Thank you for the Fantasy Issue (IZ 60); and for your update on women writers of fantasy.

May I take this opportunity to correct you slightly on your report of the James Tiptree Memorial Award (IZ 61). It was won jointly this year by Eleanor Arnason for *A Woman of the Iron People* (Morrow, 1991) and by myself, Gwyneth Jones, for *White Queen* (Gollancz, 1991). The award, instituted by Pat Murphy and Karen Joy Fowler, is for a novel or a short story which explores and expands gender roles in

science fiction and fantasy. It recognizes the contribution to sf of the writer James Tiptree Junior (aka Alice Sheldon). Sheldon, using her male pseudonym, won a share of prestigious awards in the 1970s, and was feted, among other things, for "his" "ineluctably masculine style" (Robert Silverberg). "She helped to break down the imaginary barrier between 'women's writing' and 'men's writing'" (Pat Murphy); and opened up, for male and female writers, the rich territory of sf's psychosexual agenda.

An sf prize celebrating a woman writer is a validation, another brick knocked out of the wall; and a long overdue recognition of not one but many writers who have enriched and expanded the territory of sf. "The aim of the award... is not to look for work that falls into some narrow definition of political correctness, but rather to seek out work that is thought-provoking, imaginative and perhaps even infuriating..." The prize for 1992 is \$1000, and a chocolate archaeopteryx. (Or similar; in 1991 it was a chocolate typewriter). The use of chocolate reflects the transitory nature of fame, and the thought that many awards would be far better eaten or displayed. Send your nominations please, for novels or short stories published in 1992, to Gwyneth Jones at the address below. For more information on the Tiptree Award, contact: Pat Murphy, 2238 23rd St., San Francisco, CA 94107.

**Gwyneth Jones**  
 30 Roundhill Cres.  
 Brighton BN2 3FR

Dear Editors:

Just a quick line to question certain events that occurred in Eric Brown's "Epsilon Dreams" (IZ 59).

Even though the augmentation process had been developed after a number of the inhabitants of Addenbrook had left Earth, surely there were enough new citizens and/or visitors with knowledge of the process to have questions about the actions of Challenger upon finding his "wife" on the beach.

Even the officers had to have known about personality augmentation and what was going on when Challenger removed the EII device from the prosthetic surrounding the body's head. At this point they should have secured the EII for evidential purposes and run a scan on the contents. Then,

upon finding that there was the persona of Rowena on the EII, the conclusion should have followed that an agreement of some type had been reached. Upon further investigation, the fact that there was no suicide but a type of murder for personal gain would have become evident and charges should have been brought forward in order to define the guilty parties involved, namely Challenger and Rowena. Thus, a penalty of personality erasure for Challenger would have ensued, a penalty of EII erasure for Rowena would have been in order and Tamsind would have been able to go on with her life as she saw fit, having inherited her father's apparently considerable estate after the trial and execution of sentence.

Another possibility would have been for Tamsind herself to request the investigation on the grounds that her father had been involved in a murder plot. This would have occurred after informing the police investigators that the EII removed from the body was not that of the actual inhabitant of the body. The investigators could have queried the authorities on Earth to find if it was true and the investigation could have gone from there, ending in the same result as mentioned before. Thus, things would have worked to the point of Tamsind having her "revenge" if you will and you would not have the untidy necessity of having Tamsind encoded prior to the incident and eventually being put back into her own body. Plus there is the fact that we never knew that Tamsind had herself encoded, only that she and Gabrielle had discussed it and that Gabrielle had dismissed such a thing on religious grounds. Rather a bit of a curve thrown in there, don't you think?

Now these endings are not as satisfying emotionally for the story, I must admit, but much more rational and logical. However, in conclusion, I did enjoy the story immensely.

Anyway, keep up the good work, keep the stories coming and may your subscription base increase tenfold.

A. James Nicholas, Jr.  
Penfield, New York

Dear Editors:

Thank you for Interzone 59. Among many jewels however — may your edge never fail to cut! — there was one piece so ill-researched that I'd like to try to explain some of the other side of the story. I'm talking about Steve Green's article "All in Colour For a Dime" on Stan Lee and Marvel Comics.

Steve Green has subscribed, I see, to the "Stan Lee — saviour of comics as we know them" theory of the "Marvel Age" of comics. Reading between the lines of what he has actually written casts doubt on the theory, and certain Other Knowledge (which I will divulge shortly) blows a major hole in it.

Certainly, there is no need to invoke "serendipity" to account for Marvel's early success.

As regards what we find in Steve Green's piece: Stan Lee wrote Captain America, The Human Torch and The Sub-Mariner in the early 1950s. These were unsuccessful — yet these were (some of) the very characters who were to prove so popular later. Why?

Lee's introduction of "continuing stories and 'crossover' issues" is ascribed by Steve Green to creative freedom: alternatively, it can easily be seen as a mechanism to increase sales, as some poor kid must buy the next issue to find out how the story ends, or as he finds out about other titles from the same publisher in what amounts to house-ads within the story.

And the clincher is the "Marvel Method": does anyone seriously believe that this is a script: "Let's have Dr Doom as the villain; he returns again to get revenge on Reed, and he tries to kidnap Sue Storm, but then he realizes he's falling in love with [her]; and in the meantime Reed does this, that or the other; and let it end with Doc Doom leaving because he loves Sue Storm too much to harm her"?

And then there's the story of the first appearance of the Silver Surfer, which he acknowledges as created by Jack Kirby... This is what Jack Kirby had to say about that day in 1961 (all quotes are from an interview in *The Comics Journal* 134):

"I came in and they were moving out the furniture, they were taking desks out — and I needed the work! I had a family and a house and all of a sudden Marvel is coming apart. Stan Lee is sitting on a chair crying — he was still just out of his adolescence. I told him to stop crying. I say, 'Go into Martin and tell him to stop moving the furniture out, and I'll see that the [comic] books make money.' And I came up with a raft of new books, and all those books began to make money. Somehow they had faith in me. I knew I could do it, but I had to come up with fresh characters that no-one had seen before. I came up with The Fantastic Four. I came up with Thor. Whatever it took to sell a book I came up with. Stan Lee has never been editorially minded. It wasn't possible for a man like Stan Lee to come up with new things — or old things for that matter. Stan Lee wasn't a guy that read or that told stories. Stan Lee was a guy that knew where the papers were or who was coming to visit that day. Stan Lee is essentially an office worker, ok? I'm essentially something else: I'm a storyteller. My job is to sell my stories."

When asked to comment on Lee's assertion that he, Lee, conceptualized virtually everything in *The Fantastic Four*, and sent Kirby a synopsis, Kirby replies, "I've never seen it, and of course I would say that's an outright

lie." He also tells of incidents that inspired the creation of some of his characters: for instance, how one day he saw a woman in desperation lifting the rear end of a car when her child was trapped under it, and came up with *The Hulk*.

Obviously, it's just a case of one man's word against another, but if you examine the subsequent careers of the two men — Stan Lee representing Marvel in Hollywood, Jack Kirby with an astonishing record of fluent story-telling and prolific creativity both before and since the period in question — I think it's obvious whose side of the story is closer to the truth.

A last word from Kirby: "I know the names of the stars. I know how near or far the heavenly bodies are from our planet. I know our own place in the universe. I can feel the vastness of it inside myself. I began to realize with each passing fact what wonderful and awesome place the universe is, and that helped me in comics because I was looking for the awesome." History may be written by the winning side, but Kirby's work will outlive its misrepresentation by Stan Lee and his followers.

Jonathan Coxhead  
Combridge

Dear Editors:

We thought you would like to know officially, for Interzone, that we have decided to get back into publishing with a new British Small Press.

The new press is to be called "The Sirius Book Company" and we have teamed up with Andy Richards of Cold Tonne Books who will be running the distribution side of things, whilst we use our past experience to publish the books themselves.

Our first book is due out in September 1992. It will be Keith Roberts' *Koeti on Tour*, which is the sequel to the award-winning *Koeti and Company*.

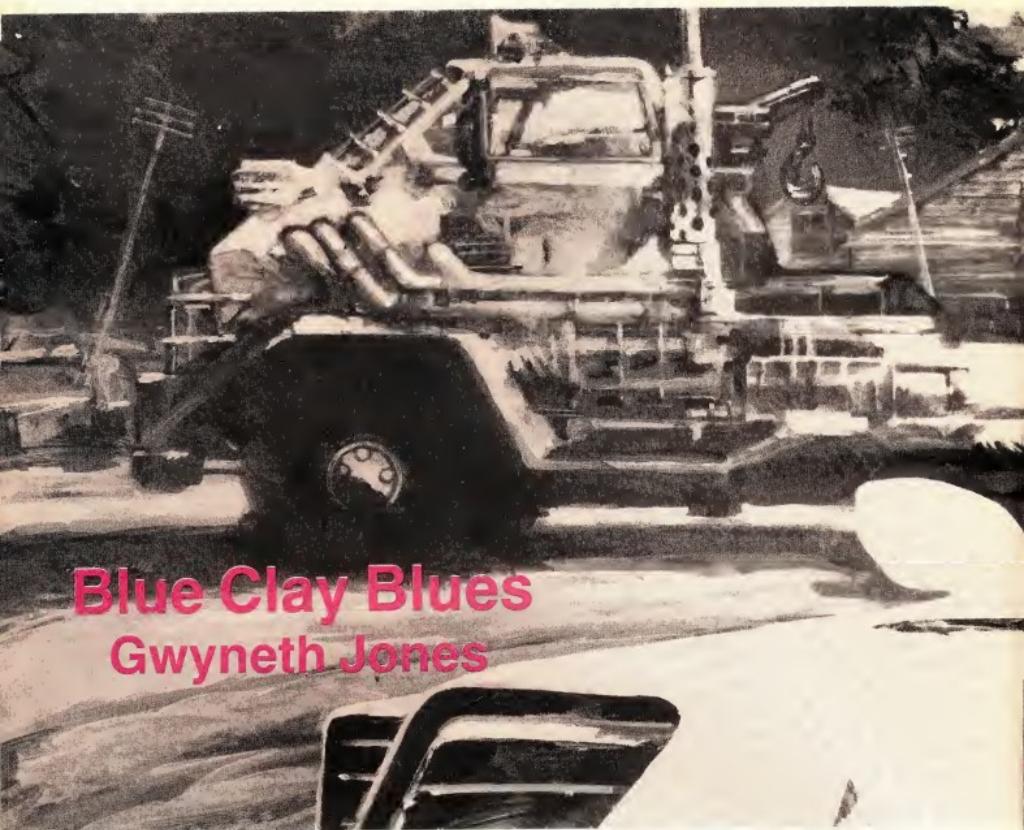
Debby & Mike Moir  
(formerly of Kerosina Publishing)  
27 Hompton Rd.  
Worcester Park  
Surrey KT4 8EU

Dear Editors:  
Re "Sweated Labour? The Women in Fantasy" (IZ 60):

Lyndon Hardy is a male writer living in California, and the "P" in P.M. Griffin stands for Pauline, who is therefore a "she."

David T. Cooper  
Sheffield

**Write to Interzone**  
— we are always  
interested to hear  
your opinions.



## Blue Clay Blues

### Gwyneth Jones

Somewhere on the outskirts of town, the air suddenly smelled of rain. The change was so concrete and so ravishing that Johnny stopped the car. He got out, leaving Bella strapped in the back seat. She was asleep, thank God. The road punched straight on, rigid to the flat horizon. The metallised surface was in poor repair. It seemed to have been spread from the crown with a grudging hand, smearing out into brown dirt and gravel long before it reached the original borderline. There were trees at the fences of dusty and weedgrown yards: clapboard houses stood haphazard amid broken furniture and rusted consumer durables. The town went on like this, never thickening into a centre, as far as the eye could see. The rain was coming up from the south, a purple wall joining sky and earth. It smelled wonderful, truly magical. There were a few rumbles of thunder knocking around the cloudy sky. He hoped for lightning.

It took longer than he'd thought. He reached in and picked up his phone from the seat, called Izzy again. He'd been calling her all day, leaving messages on the board. These repeated phonecalls from an irate

spouse would be the talk of the floor, Izzy's workplace was that kind of petty. He knew she'd hate it, she would be made miserable by the piddling notoriety. He was partly disgusted at himself, but not disgusted enough to stop.

The arrangement was that Johnny looked after Bella, and when he was on a trip she went into daycare. It was a good arrangement, except when all the emergency routines failed at once. It had broken down seriously yesterday. He had had to leave town with the baby. He had been trying to contact Izzy ever since, but they kept missing each other, with almost mythological symmetry. Every time he ran his messages, his wife jabbered at him in gradations of bewildered panic. Every time he called her, her number was busy.

Now she was at work, where they didn't allow personal phones on the floor, and he was 24 hours out in the boondocks with a two-year-old in tow. She couldn't be too badly worried though: he was keeping her well informed.

He stood and watched the advancing wall, brooding sourly on the amount of work he put into their



relationship. He had practically invented everything, all the little rituals of bonding. He wondered did Izzy feel that she was doing the same: building their life together, brick by sodding brick. Maybe she did. It's called marriage; it works, more or less.

The breakdown truck careered to a halt, followed by three motorbikes. Three men got out of the cab. The bikers remained mounted. Johnny still had the phone in his hand. He took a step, casually and let it drop onto the driver's seat.

"What's the problem, kid?"

The speaker was tall and basically skinny, but with bull shoulders and heavy arms from some kind of specific training, or maybe manual labour. He was inappropriately dressed: a suit jacket over bib overalls, no shirt. The rest were the same – not exactly ragged, but it was clear they'd left certain standards far behind. They were all of them technically white, a couple dusky; a shade further off the WASP ideal than himself. Every one of them was armed.

Johnny immediately realized that these people

would find an aesthetic impulse hard to understand. It would be as well not to brand himself a city slicker, to whom rainfall is a spectacle.

"Some kind of breakdown?"

"I guess so," said Johnny. "Engine died, no reason why. I was about to look under the hood."

"Whaddya use for fuel?" A biker, nursing his mighty steed between his knees, seemed amiably curious.

"Uh – just about anything."

"Well, all we got is just about plain gas." The bikers laughed, contemptuous of city-slicker modernity.

Ouch. That was a warning. Don't pretend to be too like them. They'll always smell you out.

"Let's take a look."

The man in the suit jacket bent over Johnny's engine. He took his time, considering there was absolutely nothing wrong. Johnny's assistance didn't seem to be required, which was good because he didn't feel like turning his back, and particularly not like bending over in a peculiarly vulnerable invitation... The other two men from the truck came close. They looked

into the back of the car and saw Bella – whose existence had, for the past few minutes, vanished from Johnny's consciousness. Something, some lax, living system inside him – blood or lymph or nerves – went bone-tight from the crown of his head to his heels.

"That your kid?"

"Yes, she's my kid."

"Can you prove you're the father?"

This bloodcurdling question did not require an answer. As Johnny mumbled "Why yes, certainly..." the speaker, a squat youth in baggy cutoffs worn over a stained but gaudy one-piece that surely belonged in another tribal culture altogether, turned away. The guy in the suit jacket slammed the hood down saying:

"Yep. That certainly is a catastrophic breakdown."

At the same moment Johnny understood that the truck, which he'd taken to be a mere accidental prop, was here on purpose. A chill and horror of excitement ran through him. He was afraid he was shivering visibly – but in fact he'd have had some excuse because just then the rain arrived. It fell over the whole scene like a roll of silk tossed down, as purple as it had looked on the horizon: scented and cold and shocking.

"What's your name, boy?"

"Johnny."

"What d'you do?"

"Uh – I'm an engineer."

"Looking for work? We could find you some. You need a wife to go with that kid. We got women too."

This banter didn't mean anything. Johnny had discovered that everywhere you go in the boondocks, people will invite you to stay. It seemed a point of etiquette to regard any chance comer as a potential addition to the community. It wasn't something to worry about, no more than the equal number of brief acquaintances who invited you to take them home, see their kids through college, advance the capital for them to set up in business. Banter covered the positioning of the truck, the chaining up of Johnny's car, all under the hammering of the purple rain. Johnny, expressing decent but not effusive gratitude, got into the back with Bella; who woke as the car was being winched onto the flatbed. She didn't speak or wail but stared all around her mightily. He could tell she'd been dreaming.

"It's okay, Bel. The car broke down. These people are giving us a ride into town."

"Daddy, why are you wet?"

"It's raining."

Bella stared with eyes like saucers, and dawning appreciation of this new means of transport, this audience, this adventure. The bikers peered at her. "Who's that?" she demanded. "What's his name?" It was the stocky young one. She could never be brought to believe that there were people in the world whose names her parents did not know. "Archibald," said Johnny at random. He spent the rest of the trip naming the other men in the same mode, and explaining over and over that the car was suddenly sick and needed a car-doctor: over and over again, while he made a desperate mental tape of their route, and reviewed worst-case scenarios; and still found a little space in which to want to kill Izzy, just beat her to shit. He knew she wasn't to blame but she was the other half of his mind, and the fight-or-flight rush had to have some outlet.

**T**he drive ended at a wired compound, shrouded by tall dark hedges. Inside, there was a wide yard and flat-topped buildings that looked somehow like a school. The rain made the wall of leaves glow blue-black, and glistened on piles of automotive rubbish. Dogs rushed to the gates as the bikers dragged them open, snarling and yelping away from kicks. Bella was scared. Johnny got down with the toddler fastened on his chest like a baby monkey, his pack on his back and jacket bulging. He surrendered his keys with a good grace.

"Papers?"

Out here, you had to carry physical documentation. It was a bitch because most of them couldn't read, and just got mad at you while they were trying to decipher your life's history. He handed over his folder, hoping the boss – at least – was literate.

He wished he had the nerve to leave some of his stuff in the car. It would have looked better, he knew. He staggered under his untrusting assumptions, and they let him off to a hall with a scuffed floor of light timber, and rows of plastic chairs. The room smelt of kids. He decided that this was the school, in so far as such things still existed. A school, and a breakdown yard: original combination for some gifted entrepreneur.

"We'll take a look, Johnny, you just wait here."

One of the bikers – Samuel – watched them through the fireproof glass of the hall doors. Bella was unusually silent – most unusually, because he knew she was riveted with excitement. He looked around, and found that she was sitting, legs jutting over the edge of the scummy plastic seat, with one hand ruminatively delving under her skirt. Her expression was of dignified, speculative pleasure.

Johnny managed to smother hysterical giggles.

"Get your hand out of your pants, Bel. People don't like to see that. It doesn't look good."

This condemnation – always in a tone of mild and absolute certainty – was the worst her Daddy ever issued. Bella understood that concern for the comfort of others and respect for their beliefs was to be her ultimate morality. She removed her hand with a sigh.

"My nobble went fat. It went by itself."

"Yeah, I know. It's the adrenalin rush. Ignore it, kid."

Samuel – stringy and pale, ropy muscled arms and a ponytail – came to fetch them. They were led into a cavern of a mechanic's workshop. The foreign and menacing smell of heavy oil filled the air. Johnny's car stood openmouthed on black greasy concrete, surrounded by a slew of tools and powerleads. It looked as if the poor beast had been through a rough grilling. Johnny hoped it had managed to hold out.

The mechanic inspected them. Johnny had rarely met a black man outside the city. Tribal divisions were so stern it would have been pointless to send a white boy off the white squares, under no matter what inalienable flag of truce. But this man's colour was only the least of the signals he sent out. Johnny gathered that he was looking at the local God, the big chief.

God was plum-dark, perhaps fortyish (but Johnny was always making mistakes about age), with sleepy narrow eyes and a whisper of moustache above his humorous mouth. Johnny liked him on sight; and was

no less very scared indeed. He slid Bel to the ground but kept a tight grip. The wrist, not the hand. One learns these tricks of technique.

The mechanic wiped his hands on a dirty rag.  
"You ain't armed, boy."

A man without a gun on his hip was so peculiar he was downright threatening. Johnny didn't mean to threaten anybody.

"I'm a journalist."

"Ah-ha. Thought you said you were an engineer." God speaks grammatical English, when he chooses. "Engineer-journalist. I'm an eejay."

God's courtiers displayed a hearteningly normal reaction. Samuel giggled, nudged Ernesto in the ribs; Gustave hooted.

"Hey, eejay. You wanna mend my TV?" Archibald grinned.

Florimond in the suit jacket cuffed him and shrugged at the visitor, assuming an air of grave man-to-man sophistication.

"Okay. So what story are you hunting, newshound?"

Unlike the others, God was not impressed by the eejay tag. But Johnny was still recovering from Bella's masterstroke: from finding himself sitting in a gangster's waiting room with a two-year-old who was calmly taking the opportunity to get in touch with her emotions... Smothered hilarity maybe gave him an aura so inappropriate as to shift the balance. As the man spoke, the casual promise of death that hung around him became less palpable. Johnny's territorial blunder might be excused.

The courtiers grew quiet. Bella squirmed and tugged, displaying her usual pathological failure to read adult atmosphere - which at this moment made Johnny long to break her arm.

"It's kind of private."

"Let the kid go, boy. She won't hurt anything."

Bella bounced free. "I won't hurt anything," she parroted smugly. She was gone, beyond arm's reach. Gustave was lifting her up to peer inside the poor tortured car. Johnny felt sweat breaking out delicately all over his body.

"Look. This is not necessarily the truth, but... I'm after the source of a kind of legend. You had a nuclear accident hereabouts, two years ago?"

The reading in God's eyes flickered upwards again. Johnny had better not dwell on this subject - nuclear poison, two-headed babies, that kind of insulting stuff.

"We had an incident."

"Okay, I'm looking for... this will sound crazy, unless you know something already, but I'm looking for a diamond mine."

"Diamonds."

"It's like this. When you get a m - an incident of that kind, a massive amount of heat and pressure is generated. The safer the plant, the less of it gets dissipated outward. It has to go somewhere, it goes down. You've got coal-bearing strata around here, not all of it even mapped. Under pressure, that old fossil fuel can be transformed into another kind of pure carbon. What I'm looking for is a deposit of blue clay, a blue clay that's new to this area. From the blue clay, you get the diamonds."

Johnny needed all his professional skill to measure

God's reaction. He couldn't use it. His attention was painfully focused on Bel: her position in the stinking cavern, who was touching her, was she being led near a door. It didn't matter. God was stonefaced, neither twitchy nor incredulous.

"I don't know if this is exactly a newslead," Johnny went on, straightfaced. "It's my own long shot. I haven't decided yet if my employer would have an interest."

God laughed softly, and shook his head in reproof (we superbeings must stick together).

"If you dig up a diamond mine on your boss's time I guess those are her diamonds, boy. Take a closer look at that employment contract of yours, you'll find I'm right. Which leaves you with nothing to sell, and here you are in the market. That could be an embarrassing position."

Johnny would have to agree. God didn't ask his opinion. He tucked away his rag and thrust out a hand which Johnny shook obediently. "I'm the schoolmaster around here. Schoolmaster and mechanic. I've seen boys like you. I've liked boys like you: smart and sweet, and a trifle off the rails. Don't you go too far Johnny. Stick to what's right."

Potato-headed young Gustave, with the scoured rec complexion, came over and delivered Bella into her Daddy's arms.

"You're a mite loaded down, kid. If you need anything else from the car, you better point."

He shook his head. God was being sarcastic: the city slicker's distrust had been noted. God nodded and considered Bella.

"She's a pretty little girl. You're too young to be her Daddy."

Johnny was young to be anybody's Daddy, as any one would know if they knew the way things worked indoors. Not only a city slicker, but a rich fucking gilded youth. Oh, shit.

"Can you prove she's your child?"

**T**he hotel had rooms over a bar that was also a diner. Johnny walked into the desolate lobby with his escort. Gustave leaned over and took one of the keys, an archaic looped shank with ward: of metal and a tag, number 5, dangling. The woman behind the desk glanced up.

"Hi Donny." She studied the new guest. "This the eejay?"

He'd been in town two hours, plenty of time for the grapevine. He was surprised the desk clerk wasn't more excited. She looked at him solemnly, a little too long; and still without gushing, exclaiming, or using his name. Johnny felt a prickling in his belly. Maybe she was just a serious-minded girl.

There were other guests, but Johnny was the only stranger. While the rain sheared down outside everybody gathered: the men and youths around Johnny, the women and children several tables away, beyond the single-screen TV that kept babbling away on a cable channel Johnny had never seen before.

There were, discernably, at least two rival camps. But nothing bad happened. No guns were pulled.

These people got married. They had family life, of a kind. But they'd forgotten anything they ever knew about sexual equality. Not one of the gaunt and battered-looking females would dare to come up to

the men's group, sit directly in front of the screen: get between a man and anything remotely like the goodies. None of them, of course, could talk to Johnny. It was one of those things you must not mention. The men'd be outraged and disgusted if you hinted there was anything weird about this arrangement. The women too, probably.

The guys were prodding for details of life "inside the dome." Their technique was to make a casual remark, about the electro-paralytic force-field; or the death-rays wielded by the android guards—and watch the effect it had on Johnny. He was kept busy protecting their egos. He knew better than to contradict them directly over anything. It would be a dangerous kindness.

He felt like the Wizard of Oz.

Bella got bored and went to stare at the local kids. The women petted her, admiring her plump arms and legs; her strapping size compared to their own toddlers. Johnny discussed diamond mining with bared teeth and needles of controlled panic rammed under his fingernails. The women were far more scary than the men. If one of them was to take Bel and go, out into the drenching purple night, what would he do?

Meanwhile, the desk clerk who was also the waitress kept passing to and fro. She was breaking the rules, but she seemed to have some kind of special licence. Every time she passed she would find a way to flirt: leaning over a nearby table to show her neat butt, reaching up to a shelf to give him the taut curve of her breast and waist. Every small town has to have its bad girl. The younger men hooted and flicked her behind. The women, young and old, pretended not to notice.

**T**he party broke up at last. Johnny lay staring at the grey ceiling of room 5, and at the inevitable cam-eye circled with its thoughtful message for your protection. The rain had stopped. The main street outside was noisy with the homegoing populace. Must've been about every able-bodied soul in town.

He'd brought Bella out before, but never so far and nothing had ever gone wrong. He considered how important it was for him to believe that it was safe. No danger, no harm, there are decent people everywhere. The upholding of some kind of liberal ideal was apparently worth more to him than his child's life and safety.

They could take *Bella* away from me.

Walking into that bar with her had been like shooting his cuff to display an antique gold Rolex. Madness! He could try to tell them Bel was a perfectly ordinary little girl, produced by traditional methods and complete with organically-grown blemishes (she had a crowded mouth, a tendency to stand over on her inherited weak ankles). You wouldn't get people out here to believe it, when they saw her next to their own scrawny, undersized, scabby-faced kids. To believe Bella was ordinary they'd have to accept that Johnny wasn't weirdly privileged, Johnny was normal... They'd have to see how far they'd fallen.

You wouldn't want to wish that on them.

Two hundred miles from NYC. There was no protection, no law, no appeal. From the moment that

breakdown truck appeared he had been in trouble. He would be criminally crazy not to cut his losses and get out—even if he was alone. But he hated to give up. He was on the track of a story, and he knew he was in the right place. If God didn't know why the fuck he was here: if God was convinced by the dazzle of irradiated gemstones—somebody must know better. That somebody would come to Johnny. He didn't have to do anything but wait.

He linked his hands behind his head, and thought about sex. He recalled Bella's experiment in the school hall. She was her father's child all right. She'd made that vital connection so naturally—doubt and danger and a mellow hint of violence... whoo, up we go. It wasn't likely that Bella would get much excitement out of amorous adventure, any more than her Daddy did. Things weren't so different in that area, inside the city or out. But the stuff comes in useful, especially when it's in short supply. It's a greed that can cover for anything.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

The desk clerk shut the door and sat down on the edge of the bed.

"Hi, Johnny."

She seemed older than he was, but she was probably a teenager. She had stringy dark blonde hair cut in a bob. Blue eyes, a wiry unkempt body in a faded overall, an out-of-doors suntan that was ruining her skin. She smiled with her eyes and touched his pantsleg, as if she was testing if it was still damp.

She glanced upward. "It's okay, Donny's minding the store. He never checks the screens, and this one don't work anyhow. I put you in here on purpose."

A heavy, warning wink told him he wasn't meant to be reassured. Donny, aka Gustave, was undoubtedly glued to the most promising peephole in town.

"Well, stranger, can we do business?" She took her hand from his leg and touched herself, both palms smoothing the slick worn fabric over her breasts. "I don't want money. I want a ride. I don't belong to anyone, you've no need to worry."

She was in a big hurry, but that was reasonable enough. Johnny would be gone tomorrow.

"What's your name?"

"Cambridge."

"That's the name of a city."

"I know. My momma liked the sound. You ever been there? The English one? I like to think it's the original I'm called for."

"No, I can't say I have." Johnny watched her, not moving a muscle. "I can't get you into the city, you know that. I suspect you're an agent provocateur, ma'am."

"Hey, no way. I'm not going to get you into trouble. I just want a ride down the road, a change of scene. And I can get you out of the trouble you happen to be in." She winked her steamroller wink again. "Get rid of those ants in your pants, city boy?" She squeezed his thigh, and giggled. Her eyes, which the camera couldn't see, were deadly serious.

"If a girl wants to get on, she has to be ready to act fast. That's the shape of things to come, don't you think? You can't act like the old technology, sit there waiting for the current. You gotta be able to change yourself, to fit what's coming at you."

Johnny was wrestling with his conscience. This could so easily be a trap. He would accept the clerk's offer (what city slicker would refuse a loose woman?). The vigilantes would burst in. There would be some kind of ersatz legal procedure, with God probably presiding. The boondocks were hot on sexual restraint. Notwithstanding her behaviour downstairs it would be Johnny's fault. The stranger caught in the act of fornication — maybe statutory rape — would be declared unfit to be in charge of a minor. All he knew about the "blue clay" could be beaten out of him on the side. He could see how tempting it looked. They'd have Bella and the diamonds. Johnny would be dumped naked out on the road — dead or alive. Dead, for preference, rather than explain himself to Izzy. He should not even dream of taking the risk.

On the other hand, all his instincts promised that the clerk was not what she seemed.

"I don't know if you have the right idea about me. I take risks, that's my job. But not for trivial reasons."

"I felt that. I can read people...pretty well." She smiled, ruefully. "This may sound crazy, but I've always thought I could have been an eejay. If someone like me could have the chance."

"I wish that everyone could have the chance," said Johnny.

She nodded, head bent.

"Mr Micane's got you all wrong, in my opinion. This blue clay that you're looking for, it doesn't represent any kind of material gain. The diamonds don't mean anything...to you. What you really want is like, a sense of living meaning in your life. Something rare and magic that could unite everyone."

"That's a beautiful dream."

She gave him a long and tender look. It thrilled Johnny to the core. This was a real contact. He wondered how much she could be persuaded to tell.

Cambridge tossed back her hair. "Okay, mister eejay. After the highfalutin comeon, do we have a deal?"

He glanced around the room, swiftly up and away at the "defective" camera. "Um — can we go somewhere?"

"You want me to take you home?" She walked to the door. Leaned there, in a pose from some ancient movie-drama. "I come off shift in an hour. There's a dark blue Nissan in the parking lot. I'll meet you beside it." She grinned up at the eye in the ceiling. "I'll take you where there's no protection. Can you do it without an audience, eejay? Ever tried?"

Johnny put his gear together. He was rapturously busy for a few minutes, during which Bella vanished as she had by the roadside. Then he remembered her. He stared at the sleeping baby, chewing his lower lip.

Next to the Japanese antique there was an ancient pickup, the colour of its print indeterminate in the yellow light of the oil lamps that guarded the hotel's rear. Cambridge looked out of the dark cab. She was silently amazed.

"I couldn't leave her. She'd wake and be scared."

She looked him over.

"Is that a gun in your pocket?"

"No, it's a spare diaper."

The clerk shook her head, pushed open the other



door for him. He clambered in, arranging Bel's warm bulk in the baby carrier on his knees. They were jolting away, lightless, through the dark town, before she managed to come up with a comment.

"In my world, men don't bring up kids. They just own them."

She chuckled. "Hey, what happens when we get to our love nest? Does she like to watch, or have you trained her to take part?"

Mental tape: a long drive. The darkness was haunted by the ghosts of well-kept lawns and scampering retriever dogs, boys on bicycles, flung newspapers and mailboxes on sticks. It was a world that Johnny had never known — inaccessible now except on records as hard to decipher as incunabula to an eye reared on print. How did people make out that stuff? Depthless, even colourless. Johnny imagined skills lost to him forever, the genes for watching b&w TV switched off in his decadent blood. He hugged Bella in her frame sling. The feel of her was so immensely reassuring, he thought all secret agents should have a baby to carry. When you can't trust anyone, and it's against the rules for you to be sure what's going on — you hug your baby, and she keeps you sane.

They parked among trees.

"What the fuck was all that nonsense about jewellery, anyway?"

Johnny shrugged. "Best I could do. I didn't expect to be picked up like that. Had to send out some kind of signal. I could see I wasn't going to get much chance to nosy around asking questions."

"You're right. And you're lucky. Micane's not stupid, you know. He's just short of information. Like all of us out here. Okay, come on. You take some tape of the crown jewels, and hurry them back to your magic dome."

"Please. I don't live in a 'dome.' I live in an overgrown shopping mall. With dirt in the corners, and plenty of problems."

Cambridge smiled, humouring him. "Sure you do."

She opened a door, steps led down. When he realized they were going underground, he understood the dazzling truth. She wasn't leading him to a bargaining rendezvous with the cadre. She had brought him straight to the goods. The room was shadowy, echoing, with a low and bowing ceiling and a strange incline. The walls, replying to Cambridge's pencil light, gleamed phosphorescent pale.

"What is this place?"

"It was a swimming pool," she said. "Olympic pool. It's been drained and boarded over for years. No water. Rest of the building's derelict." She'd changed into pants, jacket and a sweater. The rain had made the night cool. Her clothes were as squalid, strange coloured and ill-fitting as the things the men wore, but not filthy. She pulled a chunky black plastic remote out of her waistband, and keyed lights. Must be a generator on site.

Johnny stared. The glass and ceramic labyrinth: the vats. It was the real thing, a coralin plant in full production. He'd spent time in legal protein-chip production, in his apprenticeship; if only in virtuality. It wouldn't have helped. The processing here was too makeshift to be precisely recognizable. But he'd been tortured by people who knew about the wild side.

He took the time to settle Bella on his shoulders.

She had woken up in the pickup, but only to ask a few drowsy questions. What's her name... What's this car's name. She was asleep again (and the pickup was called Laetitia). He was proud of her. She was really the perfect child.

"I can make tape?"

Cambridge nodded. "That's the deal, eejay. We'll get you away from Micane. You tell the folks back home what we have here."

He mugged amazement, let her know how thrilled he was to find this spore of civilization outside the citadel: wondering all the while where the rest of the group was, where they'd got the starter; all sorts of questions to which he ought to get answers. But he already knew that Cambridge was going to tell him everything. He was stunned by her group's trust, embarrassed by the power of his job-description's reputation.

It had been obvious before the end of the 20th century that the future of data-processing and telecoms was in photochemistry. Chlorophyll in green plants converts light-energy into the motion of molecules, without thinking twice about it. The "living chip" was inevitable: compact and fast. They called the magic stuff of the semi-living processors, "blue clay," because the original protein molecules were blue-green in colour. Embedded in a liquid crystalline membrane, blue clay became a single surface of endlessly complex interconnections. Under massive magnification it looked like a coral: hence the other name, coralin. Clay? Because you can make it do anything.

So much for the technology. But then hard hardware networks, silicon and gallium arsenide based, crashed in the explosion of virus infection that ended the century. Coralin wasn't greatly superior, at that point; but it was immune to the plagues. In a deteriorating political situation — a foundering economy, wave upon wave of environmental disasters — the blue clay became political dynamite. It meant power.

Diamonds? It was a stupid cover, but good enough for the spur of the moment. Out here, a coralin plant was worth more than a truck load of gems. If the masses who lived outside the citadels could build themselves some modern data processing, they could hook up into the city networks. They'd be up and running again. And the elite who lived indoors would be running scared. The amazing thing was that more of the masses didn't try. They accepted, with chilling calm, that a certain way of life was over. They had their own world with its own rules, and the cities were on another planet.

**J**ohnny made tape, describing how it really was a coralin plant, and the journey he'd made to find it. He walked the aisles, the 360 cam on his headset taking in every angle. Cambridge stayed off camera. She didn't want to wave to the public.

He finished. They faced each other: two nodes of a diffuse molecular machine, linked by the lock and key action of certain key phrases. The living meaning, not like the old technology: change yourself to fit what's coming at you. Johnny was uneasy about the jargon. He had not deceived her. But she was deceived, and it was making him uncomfortable.

"You're a union activist, aren't you?" she said.

"Yeah." He laughed nervously. "A cellar unionist." She had been tough and worldly-wise to his soft city-boy, a rough diamond. Down at the deep end, in the pallid glow of the drained pool, the balance between them was reversed.

"You came out here to find us. What can I say? I feel... found. Like a toy left out in the rain that thought the kids would never come back to look for her. I feel rescued."

Johnny chewed his lip. Bella wriggled and muttered. One of her knees started butting him in the ribs. She couldn't get comfortable and she was going to wake. She weighed a ton.

"D'you ever hear about the Phylloxera beetle?" he said. "It's a similar story... It's a kind of bug-borne virus. Once upon a time, all the good wine came from France. They had the vines. The quality, wonderful ancient lineaged plants. Then someone accidentally shipped over some phylloxera beetles, and the whole of French viticulture was devastated. They had to rip the lot out and start again... with vines from North America, where the bug was endemic and the native vines had natural resistance. In a generation nobody could tell the difference. The wine-drinking public hardly even knew what happened."

"Phylloxera-proof telephones," said Cambridge. "Knowing what's happening in the next state. Bank credit. No more of that censored cable TV. God, I can't believe it."

Johnny registered something moving behind him. The lights were off at the shallow end, but the 360 showed Gustave coming down the steps. Johnny controlled himself with an enormous effort. Among these people you must not show fear.

"Micane's guys are here," he told her softly.

Cambridge didn't make a fuss. She eased past Johnny and walked up between the workbenches, raising more lights on the remote in her hand. The bikers, Samuel and Ernesto, emerged into brilliance. Gustave-Donny stared around him in disbelief.

"What the fuck is this place?"

The clerk held up her remote as if it was a weapon, and carefully tossed it down.

"What's goin' on, Cams?"

"Nothin'. Just a little private interview with the eejay."

This God's rule had some tinge of humanity. In other places, behaviour as aberrant as this would have got them their heads blown away, straight off. But Gustave didn't open fire.

"You expect me to believe that? You're crazy."

He jerked his shotgun for Johnny and Cambridge to go up the steps ahead. When he registered Bella, he started as if someone had dropped ice down his neck.

"Fuck!"

He pulled the headset from Johnny, carefully so's not to disturb the child. He smashed it, conclusively, against the tiled wall of the stair; and handed it back with a defiant glare.

That was bad. Out in the wasteland gun-waving is endemic, male display behaviour, not so dangerous as it looks. But the engineer-journalist is sacred, his tools even more so. He's the only link with the rest of the world. Johnny's calm left him, fear plummeted through him...

"Fucking weirdos."

**T**he breakdown truck was outside. Johnny got Bella on his knees. She woke up and began to cry. Ernesto crouched on the flatbed, muzzle of his shotgun through the glassless rear window of the cab. It pressed against Johnny's neck. Samuel's bike roared in escort. Young Gustave drove with one hand, the other awkwardly stabbing his gun into Cambridge's ribs. His eyes were wild with anger and humiliation: he'd been taken in completely. Worse, (Johnny read) he feared that his God had been taken in too.

"Fucking diamond mine!" he wailed. "What the hell you growing back there, Cams? Illegal drugs?"

Cambridge kept her eyes front. Through his own blank-brain panic Johnny could feel her arm and side against him, rigid with terror. But for Donny-Gustave she sneered the way she'd sneered when he was six and she was ten.

"Nah. Mutants, Donny. Cannibal mutant babies. And they're coming for you. Not tonight, maybe not tomorrow night..."

"Fucking shut up." His face in the driver's mirror was a darkly crumpled rectangle of hurt. "I never would've believed an eejay would be into drugs..."

Bella's loud and violent sobbing – so rare and devastating, this child's crying – was like a wall around them both. Johnny held her tight, and vowed that he was going to get Bella out of this alive. There was no betrayal he would not gladly embrace – if only, please God, he was given the chance.

"Shut the kid up!"

Cambridge yelled back indignantly. "Are you kidding? How are we going to do that? She's terrified!"

Her courage was like a lifeline. He dropped into character... "Look, I don't know what's wrong, we weren't doing anything wrong, we wanted to be private, kind of get to know each other. Would we be doing anything dirty with the kid there?" He babbled, injecting innocent panic into the real thing. He hunched himself forward, arms and head between Bella and the guns. She could feel that he was back in control – throat-chokingly, fearfully sweet the way she suddenly obeyed his shushing and went silent: her small hands clutching his collar, her wet face against his neck...

Gustave/Donny looked around with a bitter scowl.

"You and Cams was just holding hands? What about all that stuff? Looked like some kind of heroin still to me."

The pickup bucketed, its mean yellow lights barely cutting the darkness. Cambridge ducked her head and made herself small between the men, fists burrowed in her jacket pockets, letting them fight it out. Johnny couldn't remember his next line. Gustave was going to crash the damn truck. He thought he was going to pass out, the situation was so consummately awful – when *slam*, the shotgun muzzle behind his ear suddenly dealt a numbing, stinging blow to the corner of his jaw.

He yelled, sure he was dying. There was another explosion, unbelievably close. The truck slewed. Bella whimpered. Cold outdoor air belched into the cab. Johnny lifted his ringing head. A mess of dark movement resolved itself into Cambridge, hanging onto the wheel and wrestling with something flailing and heavy at the flown-open door.

"Take the wheel!" she screamed.

Johnny grabbed, and shoved Bella – dead silent – in her carrier into the well in front of the bench.

"Keep your head down, baby."

She ducked. The top of her dark head was all his eyes could see. He grappled blindly – the dumb-animal feel of the ancient machine piling in with the heavy scuffle going on beside him, a blur of confusion ... Donny's body fell out into the night. Cambridge hauled the door shut. Johnny slid over. She drove the truck. The road was dark and empty, no sign of the second biker.

"Who shot him?"

"Who d'you think?"

He looked over his shoulder. The second of Micane's guys was a slumped heap.

"God. Who shot him?"

"I didn't go out to the plant with you alone, what did you think? Donny drove into an ambush. Don't look so fucking shocked, eejay. Why didn't the stupid bastard frisk me, if he wanted to stay alive?"

"Is he dead? Are they dead?"

"I hope so." Her teeth were chattering.

**A** mile or so down the road she pulled in. There were no lights, no houses visible in a strange out-doors darkness that was faintly tinged with starlight. The three of them got down. Johnny at last could tug Bella out of the sling and hug her properly. Her eyes were huge and black in her dim face. A little child sometimes seems like a machine. Switch off, switch on: no memory, each event fresh and untaunted. She leaned back and stared.

"Stars!"

He hadn't known she knew what that word meant, not clearly enough to apply it out here.

The man on the back of the truck made no sound. Somewhere on the road another two human beings lay: Gustave and Samuel. Johnny wanted to go to the man on the flatbed, but the silence of that huddled "thing" was intimidating. Johnny's responses were from another planet.

He didn't know what Cambridge was thinking. Maybe simply breathing, standing there and breathing. She'd shot someone. How could Johnny imagine the afterburn of that?

He thought of the desk clerk's life, and how her spunky intelligence had won her a place with the boys, but only on condition she played by their rules. And only till she got pregnant, or fell in love. Then she'd be one of those gap-toothed horny skinned women, "married" to some junior male: property to be abused. She'd have a string of sickly kids, her whole life the struggle to keep one or two of them alive to adulthood. The bad clothes looked ethnic and interesting on the others. On Cambridge they were shameful. She was a real human person. She shouldn't be here, she shouldn't have a gun. She should have a future.

"I hope ..." The clerk shuddered. "I hope Donny's ... I didn't shoot to kill. Look, don't blame yourself, eejay. You wouldn't be here if we hadn't been sending out our own signals, well as we could. We knew we couldn't keep what was going on from Micane much longer. We need some support. After what's happened tonight we'll need it more. But Micane's on the

slide. With help, we can take over... I'm truly sorry about the cam."

She looked at the child. "Is having her some kind of cover? Or do you really look after her? I mean, like a woman?"

"No," said Johnny, painfully aware of the truth. "I look after her like a man. It's a start. I do my best."

He held Bella like a shield. Cambridge's movement towards him went unfinished. She touched Bel, awkwardly patting the little girl's head.

"Stay here. Someone will bring your car."

When she was gone, Johnny and Bella walked around a bit admiring the stars and bumping into a few trees. She'd soiled herself. This didn't generally happen any more at night, but he could hardly blame her. He managed to change her, Bella standing holding onto him with the crotch of her nighsuit dangling between her knees. He hugged her in a daze of gratitude. "You and me against the world, Bel," he whispered. He gave her some dried snack fruit and she asked, when they were going home.

He hoped the desk clerk's story was the truth. He didn't want to blame himself for three murders. But the black man's dominance must have been threatened for a long time, if his rivals had been able to set up a coraline plant under his nose. Since power couldn't change hands out here without violence, it wasn't Johnny's fault. If it hadn't been over the plant, it would have been something else.

He thought of setting off into this savage utter wilderness. But he didn't have a spare diaper any more, and the prospect of hitchhiking, even in daylight, was not appealing. An hour passed. His global-mobile was in his pocket. He didn't feel like calling anyone. No more signals... The coraline chip in its heart, like the processors in his cam, was practically sterile. But you weren't supposed to take any chances.

He thought of the starter that Cambridge's cadre had got hold of. They were no biochemists, they didn't build it from scratch. He imagined a brother eejay dead out here, or an eejay stripped of his magic and too ashamed even to come home...

Bella, he found, was happier on his back. He walked her, holding hands over his shoulder, singing nursery rhymes. She didn't say a thing about guns, or shooting or bad guys. Which didn't mean this adventure hadn't scarred her for life. He writhed to think of the debriefing he'd have to go through with Izzy.

**W**hen he heard the car he hid until he was sure it was his own, and the driver was Cambridge, and there was no one else with her. She handed over the sliver of plastic card, his keys. It was good to have that safely back in his hand.

They stood by the car. Johnny put the sidelights on dim, so he could see her face a little.

Boondock episodes were always incredibly charged: vows of eternal friendship, exchange of instant pictures that would be kept for a few months; until they lost all meaning. This one had only been more spectacular, the configuration was the same. Johnny told himself his picture was already fading in her purse. But he wanted to give her something real.

"How's Donny?"

She shook her head. Don't ask.

"About that ride –"

She thought he was joking. "Another time," she said. "You get back and send us some reinforcement. I don't ask what form it's going to take, you guys know best. But make it soon, okay?"

He settled Bella in the backseat, with her beloved plastic tilt-rotor and her herbal bunny-pillow. He got into the car, opened the window wide.

"Cambridge, there's nothing for you in that town. Don't go back. Get in, come with us. I can fix everything."

He'd thought it out – in a split second. He could hack the problems involved; what's gilded youthfulness for? His mistake was that he'd forgotten, for a moment, who he was supposed to be. In the dim light he saw her eyes narrow.

"Me? Leave the cadre? Wait a minute. Why shouldn't I go back?"

He stared over the dash, "I'm an eejay, ma'am. I don't take sides. I just made the tape that just went on the news."

At no point had she told him he mustn't make live transmission. It had occurred to him (the Wizard of Oz) that she might not know what he was doing. The 360 looked unimpressive. But he was a journalist, and she didn't ask. The coraline plant could have survived. The legal status of pirated coraline wasn't sewn up completely. There were ways, angles: there were lawyers on the side of the people. Johnny had been helping, getting them publicity. It wasn't his fault that violence had then exploded, on prime-time news. It would have taken the police no time to get a precise fix. They were entitled to deal swift and hard, with armed conspiracy involving information technology. They would be here soon. No one need get hurt. If there was anyone around the derelict pool after the final warning, they'd stun gas the site and haul the bodies out before they burned the plant.

"Okay." She gripped the rim of the window. "Okay, fine. You faked your unionist rap. You took your pictures, and sent them straight back to the bastards in power. Okay, I was a fool. I can accept that. But you think I'd come with you? I don't want to escape from here. I want 'here' to escape from being the way it is. I thought a guy who was in the Union was someone I could trust. But you were only interested in getting a story. Well fuck you, Mr Eejay. Let them do their worst. You can't shut us out forever. Shit – the arrogance. Any day now, there's going to be a revolution. And you're going to find yourself sitting right in the middle, Mr Fucking Neutral Observer."

"That's where I belong," said Johnny. "I'm a journalist."

Cambridge looked down at him, as from a great height.

He saw the blighted skin, every mark picked out by the upward light. The contempt in smart, clear eyes. She would have liked to be an eejay. Maybe she had the makings, who could tell. Johnny did not go for the idea, though it was widely accepted, that there were no genes left out here worth worrying about.

"Violence is never going to solve anything."

She curled her lip. "What kind of violence? The bureaucratic kind or the personal kind? I don't make that distinction."

"I'm sorry."

"No," said the desk clerk. "No. You're not sorry,



Johnny." She let go of the rim and walked away.

**J**ohnny drove round lumpy roads, helpless, until the computer suddenly recovered its bearings and he was on his way home. He thought about the cold Fenland town which he had visited once. (It would be a mistake to let anyone out here know you'd actually left the continent, that would be too much). He thought about the European solution to the big problem. No citadels there. The countryside was empty. Everyone lived in the cities, cheek by jowl. In England the wasted people were called the poor. You stepped over them as you went into your hotel. He didn't believe it was any worse to let them have their own world, with its own rules.

Johnny truly was in the union, which made him a radical and dangerous character, inside. But you can be opposed to some of the laws, and still believe in law and order. You can be on the side of the Indians, and still think it's a bad idea to sell them guns and firewater. He wished he could explain. One day the citadel of civilization would spread out the way it used to, and cover the whole continent. But that would not get a chance to happen if you let the wolves into the sleigh. You couldn't let yourself be distracted by the fact that the wolves had human faces.

He couldn't help Cambridge. He could only be glad,

as the road jolted away, that his mask had slipped at the end. It would have been worse to leave her still believing that she'd met her saviour. He had given her something real after all: a creep to despise. Maybe it evened the balance, just a little.

He drove, and the pain eased. The boondocks episode began to fade in the accustomed, dreamlike way. And Bella, asleep in the back, felt ever more like his talisman, his salvation, as he scurried for the sheltering walls.

Johnny Guglioli and (briefly) Bella, appear in a different light in the novel *White Queen*, published by Gollancz.

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**Gwyneth Jones** makes her third appearance in *Interzone* with the above tale. Her first two stories for us were "Gravegoods" (issue 31) and "Forward Echoes" (issue 42). Her most recent sf novel is *White Queen*, and recently it has been named co-winner of the James Tiptree Memorial Award for science fiction. She also writes juvenile sf and fantasy novels as "Ann Halam," and has conducted the interview with Garry Kilworth which appears in this issue of *IZ*. She lives in Brighton.

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# Softly – As in an Evening Sunrise

## Brian Aldiss

**O**ne day they found the figure of a man. It took them three days of walking over broken ground to travel from its feet to its head. It was sixty-three miles long.

Neither Dud nor Bebn was surprised. The name of their planet was Anomaly; anomalous things must be expected to occur on a world that was itself an anomaly. A1 was its official designation in the terrestrial department which controlled these galactic matters. The name of the department was the CICI, the Cosmological Investigation and Classification Institute.

No one had ever set foot on Anomaly. "Vacant possession with a vengeance," said the CICI official, grinning.

Dud had arrived first through the hypertube. He spent his early days on Anomaly remaining within a few yards of the tube mouth, paralyzed with an insecurity he could not name. It isn't like me, he told himself. Snap out of it.

Maybe it was the flavour of kerosene. Maybe it was the shrill silence. Maybe it was the fact that he cast no shadow.

The planet was empty, empty as the top right-hand drawer in a new desk.

His insecurity wore off gradually. In a way, he was reluctant to let it go. It was like throwing off clothes. Anomaly almost demanded a cautious response. Gravity: 0.9E. He turned a cautious cartwheel.

When the CICI concluded that Dud was not in any foreseeable danger, they despatched Bebn down the hypertube. She materialized in a crouching position. All that non-existence over the light years had mussed her hair.

"Wow!" she said. Her first words on Anomaly. "Welcome to the edge of the universe," Dud said. They shook hands formally.

Dud was the small and wiry type, not carrying a great deal of musculature. He was ranked as displaying 4BM feelings of inferiority which, according to the scrupulous gradings of the CICI, meant he was ideal colonist material and NTA (Not Too Aggressive). Bebn, on the other hand, had evidently been chosen because she strongly resembled the women who appeared in space operas in multi-VR, shapely with streams of leonine hair. However, her bust was insufficiently eloquent, and she had sheared her hair to come through the tube. She too had her defence mechanisms, ranked 2KF.

Dud had been born and bred on Earth, Bebn on

Mars, of intergalactic parents. Enough species divergence had occurred between them for them to be unable to procreate, despite sexual compatibility. His eyes were mint-green.

Bebn was also struck by insecurity on arrival or Anomaly. She expressed it in staring pupils, agitated movements, rigid limbs. But with Dud's help she soon overcame the feeling.

"It's the shrill silence," she said. "Rather like a courtroom."

"And that flavour of kerosene?"

"And the way we cast no shadows..."

They ordered all kinds of equipment through the hypertube. But CICI, with its galactic-wide commitments, operated on a shoestring and was subject to governmental controls. Very little equipment was forthcoming.

"No guns," Bebn complained.

"No newspapers," he responded. "And they promised."

A desk came through the tube. "There's a wire coathanger in the top right-hand drawer," she said.

"At least they don't expect us to do any paperwork."

They feared to move far from the hypertube exit until they found it followed them at a distance. Across all the thousands of light years, it was locked onto their personal genetic coding. It presented itself a little more than a blurred hoop, faint in sunlight – although to stare into it was to see something blurry which affected the vision.

**W**hat they had in mind was some favourable area in which they might live. So they walked. They took a long stroll across the surface of Anomaly. The scenery was so drab they were soon suffering from sensory deprivation.

Wrapped in this peculiar state, Dud found forsaken thoughts drifting like colours of indeterminate hue through his mind. His days as Chief Expediter on the rococo planet of Ishtummer, and his disgrace there, were far distant. His time-suspended voyage through hypertube had divorced him from the old life.

"It's bleak, isn't it?" Bebn said, not for the first time.

He answered affirmatively, without giving her a glance. His gaze sought a way through the pathless desert. He knew she felt guilty that she drew no greater response from him. But Dud had determined never again to fall in love. No woman should paint her face for him again. The anthropic universe, it seemed to

him, held room for intelligence; love was a more uncertain quality. Love had cost him his job on Ishtummer. This time, he intended to succeed.

And yet... why his constant watch for signs of life in the dead world? Why if not from a desire to share – to mitigate – the isolation individuals experienced – even despite themselves?

And yet... just to have the presence of another human in these profoundly alienating wastes was a consolation. At night, when the anchoritic pair slept below a moon which never changed its position from zenith, Dud felt himself reaching for Bebn, clasping her with a passion which met ready response. The wisdom of their bodies over-rode the uncertainties of his mind.

The surface of Anomaly was remarkably uniform, being neither exactly desert sand nor precisely naked rock. Rather, it was formed of something resembling a yielding plastic. To walk across it was like proceeding over a vast stale sponge-cake.

"The formation of this planet must have been..." Bebn said.

"Yeah... bizarre," Dud finished. They were already on each other's wavelengths. They said little at this stage. Every word they spoke was recorded. Bebn thought all the more. It seemed to her sometimes that her thought was solid and spongey as the rock.

"We've got a real puzzle here," she said, and then apologized for the cliché; but the whole planet was as bleak as a bent wire coathanger.

Nothing grew. Formations here and there held vague resemblances, they could not say to what. It was as if they walked through the lower regions of a forgotten mind. The sky was a stone-age grey, promising no cloud cities.

They got into the habit of holding hands as they progressed. The human hand suddenly acquired talismanic properties, a ward against desolation. She told him all the spicy horror stories she could think of in which hands were involved. Behind them, the trunk of an invisible elephant, the hypertube followed.

The sea when they approached it was scarcely recognizable as sea. Without waves, without the agitations of a normal ocean, it lay torpid, the colour of a plain biscuit. Small marginal wavelets curled backwards into their vast parent like lips contorted by sneers. The setting sun cast across the water a thin path of snow which did not glitter. Dud and Bebn stood for a while observing, unsure of what they observed. They found their hands had grown together.

"Truly one at last," observed Bebn, ironically.

"United we stand. And sit."

"And lie."

"That too. So there are consolations."

But the sea was indeed sea, and tasted salt in a sly way. It was fringed by no seawrack, no discarded shells, no remnants of crab or seal. The few stones on its margins, the colour of dog's liver, were lozenge-shaped rather than rounded. It was a sea sans myth, sans champagne. Yet the two humans felt inside themselves the indefinable hope which sight of ocean brings. They regarded its unheaving wastes, almost wishing some monstrous thing of cathedral-like dimension would shoulder its way up, out of the brine, to confront them. Life thirsted for life. Nothing

happened; it was the predominant characteristic of Anomaly.

Together, Bebn and Dud built a hut from the materials the hypertube grudgingly extruded. The sections locked together magnifically. A free wristwatch in black ardriflex came with the kit. They sited the hut to overlook the beach and sulky sea. And then prepared to wait, as they had elected to do. Still they cast no shadow, and the days passed leaving no memorial.

**W**hen the day came that their hands were separable again, it happened unexpectedly.

In the palms of their hands, a red horseshoe mark remained where the join had been. They danced round each other, delighted by the feel of freedom. Danced and clasped hands.

"Lucky it was only your hand I was clutching," Bebn laughed.

They took to wandering, even wandering apart. It was on one of her solitary expeditions that Bebn came across the prostrate man, though that is hardly to describe how the encounter took place. She was, in fact, walking inland rather blindly, up a slight but tiring incline, fending off the monotony which threatened to draw its blind down over her perceptions by playing her desperate game. Trials.

Falsely accused of something dreadful, she had to clear her name before a hostile court. Urine had flowed under her favourite aunt's front door. Aunt Meg had slipped in the puddle, fallen, and lain on the top step of the porch incapacitated. In so doing, she had let go of the leash on which she kept her ferocious pet Pekinese, Dido. Finding he was free, Dido had bounded onto the lawn of the house next door, attacking and killing Bumphrage, the neighbour's rottweiler. Mrs Armstangler, arriving home at that moment and witnessing the death of her prize dog, had driven her Toyota into an ice-cream van, which overturned, severely injuring two of the three Lorelei children, Patsy and Aucubus.

For this whole chapter of accidents, Bebn was held to be responsible. Forensic science, represented by a shady Dr Obispo, proclaimed the urine to be hers. Her defence, that her aunt's toilet door was immovably jammed at the time, was under question. This painful charade – one of innumerable trials staged at the bar of her mind throughout the years – exercised all Bebn's defence mechanisms, and to some extend exorcised the perennial sense of guilt which hung over her.

The dice were loaded against her. Somehow, she had to argue and charm her way out of an indictment which carried the death sentence as its ultimate penalty. Her Uncle Bysshe, all baggy eye and silly side-whisker, was in the witness box. Uncle testified that only the week previously had he oiled the bathroom door – when Bebn realized that before her, in what she still regarded, however vaguely, as "real life," loomed something resembling a big toe.

The only really big big toe but one on Anomaly.

Momentarily, she thought Uncle Bysshe must be responsible. Then, ceasing to wool-gather, she brought her attention to bear on the present. Approaching with caution, she saw that the toe was attached to a foot. There were four other toes. This she saw as she breasted the slope. The foot was in ruinous condition.

She thought of Gulliver. In a rush of horror to the head, she thought this enormous foot might belong to a real person. Closer inspection revealed it to be made of stone.

The foot rose majestically above her. No trade mark of ogre paediatrician could be more awesome.

Bebn stood in a trance as she realized that the foot had a twin, and that both belonged to legs which stretched away into the distance. The knee was remote up the hillside. The more remote for being entombed in shrilling silence.

The legs were cracked and stained by extreme age. Part of the nail of the big toe had fallen away and lay nearby in the dust, monument to the mortality of rock.

She stood there in the museum atmosphere, remembering to breathe. For a moment, the wretched tenement eight stories below the Duct, in the slum district of Mars's Tharsis City, seemed desirable. Even Uncle Bysshe seemed desirable. Compared with this ponderous mystery, Sucking the air of Anomaly into her lungs, she expelled it with a great shout: "Dud!"

The detached nail in the dust, as if in startlement, leaped up and attached itself to the foot, in the exact position it had once occupied.

At that, she screamed and ran. Although she enjoyed fairy tales, being trapped in one was less to her taste.

As she reached the shore she saw her partner standing by their hut, motionless. "Oh, Dud..." she said, longing to throw herself into his arms.

But Dud appeared strange, a cut-out version of himself. His expression unpleasant, his body somehow brittle, his hair discoloured, the ardriflex watch missing from his wrist. "Dud?" This time her tone was questioning. She approached more slowly.

"Dud, what are you doing?"

For answer, he raised a hand above his head and began to shrink. When he was two feet high, he burst. A brilliant display of electrons fizzed and scattered in all directions. To vanish immediately.

Without undue sloth, Bebn ran and locked herself in the hut. She was still there two days later, when Dud returned from his walk.

**A**t first, she would not let him in. But he looked okay through the window, normal size, complete with watch. She opened up.

They talked things over. For the sake of peace between them, Bebn agreed that she had been hallucinating in the case of the fake Dud. On the huge figure and leaping toenail she would not give way. Eventually, he agreed to make an expedition to investigate the phenomenon.

Dud was condescending. "You're on trial, Bebn."

"Not again," she said, under her breath.

The way was long. The going was slow. Days and nights were carbon copies. The latest despatch of rations through the hypertube was uninspiring; neither of them cared for dried curried jellyfish. Seeing Bebn was about to relapse into one of her court cases, Dud began to talk.

He hated him for it.

"We're the only life on Anomaly – apart from your flying toenail," he said. "You know what that means. We're breathing up all the oxygen and it is not being replaced. We're each producing a kilogram of carbon



Illustrations by Bernard Sigaud

dioxide every day. That's going to pile up. It'll gradually overheat the planet, if we don't suffocate first."

"Depends how long we're here..."

"Could be centuries...Just try to breathe less."

"At least under the terms of our contract they'll send us a rejuvenate every forty years."

"Forty-one. We couldn't negotiate them down to forty, if you remember. What I'm worrying about is to what extent Anomaly belongs in our universe. Think of it this way, Bebn. Ours is an anthropic universe, despite what the Melanesians argue to the contrary. The fundamental dimensionless constants of physics are so trimmed that the universe is optimal for the existence of carbon-based creatures and, even further, for mankind with its scrutinizing intelligence. The universe is adapted to man rather than vice versa. Its size, its age, its constitution all demonstrate a design specification which—"

"Dud, shut up. You can't understand that some people don't want to communicate. If you were one of thirteen kids, instead of an only child, you'd see—"

"Same design specifications may apply to families. You have to have a brood of thirteen in order that one of them may be a selfish, ignorant nutcase of a woman..."

She hit him and he continued his main spiel. "What I'm getting at is this, darling. The anthropic universe has been designed, not only for mankind, but specifically for mankind originating on Earth, that mediocre and uncertain planet which, like a Korean VER, only just works. There's not an inhabited world we didn't have to terraform first."

The walk was exhausting enough without expending extra energy, but she said, "There you go. Maybe the universe is designed not for mankind but for intelligence. In which case, you and I could wink out of existence at any moment..."

"Bebn, baby, throughout thousands of years, von Neumann machines have been scouring the galaxies in search of other intelligent life. They've found nothing. Earth owns the whole damned universe. Thank god, that knowledge has sobered up mankind enough for them to learn civilized behaviour and create SPMs."

"You aren't suggesting this giant figure is a Self-Procreating Machine?" she said, scornfully.

"Don't be deliberately silly. I'm saying — getting round to saying — that everything in the universe is ours, and'knowable. But our universe is only one of an infinite number, some of which are detectable by the latest instruments. There's reason to believe that Anomaly exists in a region of space where another universe overlaps with ours."

"Sure. And that universe has laws which conflict with ours in ways yet to be determined." She thought, irritably, Why else were we despatched here? Judging by this ball of rock over which we trudge, Universe X lost out, and conditions aren't suitable for the existence of life. I'm not claiming my statue was ever alive. But as to who or what built it...I'm scared. At any moment, I'm going to be judged and found guilty of cowardice. "Maybe we shouldn't go any further, Dud..."

**W**ithout another word, they pressed onwards, lips rather tightly closed. Chaos was ever-present. How much human pain was self-imposed!

The sun shone without heat. They were hot enough when they reached the final incline. The upper slopes of the incline were dominated by that inscrutable big toe.

Dud scratched his head. "It certainly looks like a toe."

"The mind is one part of the universe humankind has never properly explored," she said, with contempt. "If course it's a fucking toe. What did I tell you?"

Annoyed, he went on ahead of her. The rock squeaked underfoot. The mouth of the hypertube followed him like a dog. Sexist, she thought, savouring the old-fashioned word.

Eventually, she joined Dud where he stood, leaning with one hand against the stone ankle. They talked to almost no effect. There lay the giant figure, asking no questions, posing many. It seemed to her slightly less ruinous than she remembered, almost as if her presence had damaged it in the first place. She started a trial about that. Uncle Bysshe was slouching towards the witness box to be born, but night was coming on. They decided that tomorrow they would trek to the head of the statue. Mists gathered as they made camp. The sun set in the east as usual, without drama.

It took them three days of walking over broken ground to travel from its feet to its head. It was sixty-three miles long. Neither Dud nor Bebn was surprised. Ascending its stony locks, they hauled themselves up until they stood on the figure's brow, looking down the length of the figure. Dud put his ear to the rock, eavesdropping on mineral thoughts.

Bebn ascended an eyebrow, the better to gaze down on the immense face, serene in a sorrow beyond all immobility. It was a neuter face, as impartial as Buddha. Its eyes were half-closed under stone eyelids. Its lips held an expression of sweetness which mingled wisdom with simplicity. She fell in love with it. Here was the ultimate in resignation, in calm beyond life or death. To herself she thought, If I'd ever known someone like this, I'd be a better person.

"Here's alien intelligence," she said. Releasing the words was like releasing a dove. Suddenly the universes were clear to her thought. Of course, the illusion was only momentary. "Something the von Neumann machines never discovered..."

"It's a trap," Dud said. "We'll give the hypertube a good look and then we'll get back to the beach."

"I could stay here forever."

"You want to meet the thing that carved it?"

So they commenced the long return. The toenail was still attached to its toe. They noted it as they passed at a steady pace.

At the hut, on the beach, by the sulky sea, there was a difference now. The burden of that immense reclining figure was ever present in their minds. Its existence proved many things they could not comprehend. It followed them into the warrens of sleep. Even its benignity was oppressive. It was with them when they made love. Even its sexlessness was intrusive.

Sometimes they could not sleep. Bebn went out one night and stood looking at the stars. They filled only a quarter of the southern sky. The rest was blackness,

pierced dimly by one distant galaxy. She stood on the edge of the universe where the anomaly intruded. Dud came to join her.

"It's as if an immense cover was being drawn over this planet."

"Another week and it'll cover us completely."

"You're trying to scare me again, Dud. Can you see that horrible thing watching us from the sea?"

"You're trying to scare me again. We're like children."

She laughed. They were like children. For all the vast accession of knowledge implanted within their skulls, they were children walking on the fringes of a vast ocean. The thought summoned up references from her mental index. The words of one of the world's most impressive intellects came to her: "To myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the sea-shore, and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, while the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me..." She'd read the words first inscribed in beryllium over the margins of the *Crab Nebula*.

And it occurred to Bebn to wonder if it was not the unconscious power of this remark which had moved her and Dud to seek a place by the sea, rather than inland, which would have served just as well. Then there came to her the words not only of Isaac Newton but of Wittgenstein. "We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched." Supposing the universe was indeed created for intelligence: then what was intelligence created for?

Could intelligence, the striven-for wisdom, prove ultimately hostile to flesh?

For her, incomprehension was as miraculous as comprehension. "And I condemn myself for it," she said aloud to the starry space.

In the following days, Dud remained quiet and almost motionless. He sat with his back to the hut wall, gazing at the liquid sneers upsetting the margins of the sea. Occasionally, he muttered to himself or wrote with a mouse on a pad. He rose before dawn to watch to westward as the clouds parted and the sun rose with an edmod attempt at majesty.

Aloud he said, "In the Age of Pansophy, not to know something is unpardonable..." Bebn felt it was her fault that those were the only words Dud spoke that day.

As if cobbling together a silent litany, Dud ran through the various data which proved the home universe had been tailor-made for an intelligent carbon-based species. Much of it was ancient knowledge. The argument based on stellar nucleosynthesis had been formulated long ago. If the resonances of the three nuclei, helium-4, beryllium-8, and carbon-12, had not been rigged so that the energy-level of the latter was just above that of the other two nuclei, no carbon would have been created within solar reactors.

Further, the next step in the production of heavier elements within a star would be the fusion of carbon-12 with helium-4 to produce oxygen-16. If this fusion occurred, then almost all carbon would be converted into oxygen and thence into heavier elements. The result would be a universe lacking the vital carbon on



which life processes were based. But – was not this the hand of a mysterious Being operating in favour of humanity? – the resonance of oxygen-16 was fixed at one per cent less than the combined energy of helium-4 plus carbon-12, so no such synthesis could take place. Conditions for life, in other words, had been fine-tuned before the universe began.

He ran over these proofs and others, the unique properties of carbon, the peculiar propensities of water, and so on. And, most importantly, the necessity for biological processes to be framed within a rigorous time structure: a biotemporality for all life-forms which did not apply to the larger *umwelt* of the inorganic universe...Yes!

She wondered – but not aloud – if he was going crazy. When she approached him, he waved her away.

Bebn walked inland a short distance, seating herself by something almost like a boulder. She looked for a blade of grass to chew, but of course there was nothing. Another ghastly show-trial was beginning. She could not fight it off. The shadowy room, the flight through deserted streets, the arrest after dark, the slam of the cell door... In her childhood, she had so often been brought to the bar, falsely arrested for the murder of her mother. Now she stood accused of the murder of Dud. She knew he had simply rushed into the ocean and drowned himself. The jury didn't. Their faces told her that. Again she confronted the death sentence.

She was allowed to speak before the verdict was delivered. Fortunately, she had worked in a court-room for five years, drawn like a magnet to the processes of justice. There were trials every day on Thousands and Blows, the Chinese planet where she had been indentured.

"If I may say one final word in my own defence, I've led a simple and dedicated life, on both Mars and Thousand Blows. I volunteered for Operation Anomaly for the public and scientific good. Any idea of murdering Dud, or my mother, or even my Uncle Bysshe, came to that, never entered my head. Furthermore..."

The joy of discovery forced Dud to his feet. He had the answer. He walked rapidly along the shore, fists clenched before him like a boxer.

"Of course – that's it! That's it! Once you reach the solution, it's simple. What's anomalous is our universe, with its rigged parameters... What's anomalous is us. You have to look at it through the looking-glass. Where-as in other universes, neighbouring universes..."

He walked rapidly along on the tepid shore, gesticulating as he went. Joy filled him, a dizzy illumination which left him remote from his baser self. Buoying him was the pure hydrogen of knowledge.

And as he spoke his discovery aloud, he saw something miraculous. His eyes, his mouth, opened wide. A bird was flying overhead.

It was a large bird, the size of a heron, with a grand slow wing motion. It passed nearby, casting its shadow near Dud's feet.

It was a wonder. An absolute wonder. He called to it. His soul went out to it.

The bird made no alteration to its majestic wing-stroke as it followed the arrow of its beak forward. Calling, Dud ran in pursuit, trailing this one token of life.

The great creature journeyed on, unheeding.

He lost it at last, and collapsed on the beach, tracing

it with his gaze as the bird became a dot in the hazy sky before being swallowed entirely by distance. After a while, he rose to his feet in more solemn mood and walked back to tell Bebn what he had seen.

**A**s he drew nearer to their hut, his previous excitement returned. Seeing her, he broke into a run.

Bebn was waving her arms. "Hey," she called, when he was still some way off. "You know what? I just saw a bird. A real live bird. It flew right over my head, feathers and all. What does that mean?"

He stopped abruptly. "You saw it?"

"It was a real bird, the size of a heron, flapping slowly." Playfully, she imitated the motion. "Isn't that marvellous! So we aren't entirely alone..."

They danced outside the hut, hardly aware why they rejoiced so greatly. "What a symbol of hope!" he exclaimed. "A big white bird!"

Bebn looked at him curiously. "White? No, it was a brown bird. Brown as my arm. Definitely brown."

"No, no, I saw it clearly. It flew right over my head. An all-white bird. Not a brown feather on it."

"You need your eyes tested, you idiot! Brown, brown, brown!"

"You're colour blind, you ninny. Whiter than driven snow."

"Brown, distinctly brown, you fool!" And they began to quarrel furiously over the colour of the bird. All that day they shouted at each other or sulked and refused to speak. At night, they slept apart in opposite corners of the hut. She dreamed of snakes. He woke to the taste of geraniums in his mouth.

Morning came by slow degrees. The sun heaved itself out of the crimson of the west and Bebn rose feeling penitent.

Kissing Dud, she said, "I'm sorry I was so angry yesterday. It was the excitement. Obviously, we saw two different birds."

Dud held her hand, looking down at the horseshoe still inscribed in her palm. Pulling her close, he began to whisper rapidly into her ear. "I'm sorry too, Bebn. I have everything clear in my head now. We both saw the same bird, but I interpreted it in different ways, according to taste. In any case, it wasn't a real bird."

She pulled away, half-laughing, half-annoyed. "Why are you whispering?"

"Because Something can hear us. That artificial moon in the geostationary orbit overhead picks up our signals. And the bird – the Something sent it, projected it. The Something isn't used to biological carbon-based life. It sent the bird as a – well, a reward, knowing we'd like company."

The look she gave him held amusement and alarm. "Listen, Dud, I don't want to be stuck on this planet with a loony. The bird was a projection, you say? When is a bird not a bird?"

"Exactly. When it's a projection. Answer to all our riddles. The way I once thought I saw you and you once thought you saw me. Something was practising its art..."

She regarded the idea as wildly unlikely. But then – her own life always seemed to her wildly unlikely. How long could the show go on without everyone – everyone on all the planets – suddenly bursting into laughter at the absurdity of it? Dud's guess would at least

explain the giant calm figure inland. The Something had been, in Dud's words, practising its art. In a new medium. It was mad enough to be almost convincing.

Bebn clutched her head and laughed wildly.

"Why should this...this hypothetical Something of yours reward us?"

So he told her. Because Dud had worked out the problem it had set them. Something was rewarding him for the correct answer. When they were deposited on Anomaly, they had crossed into an outcrop of a universe where creation had worked out differently. Physical laws were not the same in the two universes.

"Stellar nucleosynthesis has to work only slightly differently here in this universe for carbon to be so passing rare that biological beings have never developed. What we call 'the passage of time' is merely our biological experience of temporality - the trail we living things tread from birth to death. It is not the whole of 'Time' - that idea's simply an egocentric way of looking at things. Time isn't homogeneous, as people prefer to believe; in our home universe, time's a layer cake composed of various temporalities. In a non-biological universe, like this one, there are only two temporalities, both distant from human experience, the atemporal and the eotemporal. They comprise between them all the time there is in - in Something's universe."

She stood up and stared out to sea. "Atemporal I understand. It implies the basic universe, with particles of zero restmass, photons travelling at the speed of light forever. Nothing corresponding to event. But eotemporal?"

"Eotemporality's the level of temporality where beginnings and endings - in contrast to our bi temporality - are confused. Only succession has meaning. Supposing I mark a trail through the forest for you. The blazes on the trees tell you the way. They don't tell you the direction. The laws of microphysics are eotemporal - reversible in time..."

Dud had spoken crisply when dealing with known science. Now his talk became slower, less confident. He walked with her over the barren slopes, gesticulating to assist his words.

"I'm just trying to...I mean, in such a universe, totally lacking any organic component, it's hard to see how intelligence would develop. But if intelligence is the...well, the desired end-product, then presumably it would develop in any universe. Somehow. Out of a cloud of interstellar gas, let's say. And eotemporal in its nature."

"That would be quite possible," she said. "What it lacked in density it could make up in immensity. Such a disembodied intelligence might be enormous, spanning light years. And able to think at the speed of light."

**T**hey both fell silent, digesting the idea. Intelligence would fit the universe it poured into, as liquid fits its container - whatever the composition of the jug. As my thoughts fit my brain, she told herself, not without distaste.

"If such a Something existed," she went on, "it might be in a better position than planet-bound biological beings to detect the presence of intelligent life in neighbouring universes. Is that what you're getting at?"

He nodded his head. "There are probably countless universes, each differing slightly in composition. And

our gaseous Something, forever seeking contact..." He had a terrifying vision - where did it come from? - it hit him - of an entity like a dust storm, raging with loneliness, eternal, ceaseless, bursting from uninhabited universe to uninhabited universe, like a demented apparition rushing from tomb to tomb. Always greeted with the terrible pressures of isolation. Chambered within infinity. With no knowledge of time. But tormented with a sense of endless vain process.

Bebn clutched Dud's arm. They stared at each other, eyes wide, mouths ajar.

The vision in all its haunting power had been projected into both their minds simultaneously. It was in contact with them.

He spoke huskily from his dry mouth. "Poor thing..."

"Oh god, I'm frightened," she said. They clung together, body against body, limb next to limb - the biological way of consolation.

"It needed to get in touch," Dud said.

"It is in touch."

"Because it created Anomaly and its sun. This isn't a real planet, merely the Something's idea of a planet. Put all the signifiers together, the wavelets lapping back into the ocean, the strange sunrises, the chunk of the statue's toe snapping back into place..."

She was still trembling, but said, indistinctly. "Oh, yes, I've got it now. The Something, being eotemporal, has no knowledge of biological time. So our kind of temporality is alien to it, and it's got it backwards? Right?"

"Yes. Time's running backwards here." He laughed. "Or was. Until I worked out the real situation, so proving we have intelligence. The bird - let's not argue about its colour - was not merely a reward for passing the test. It's also a sign that Something too has learned a new fact. He's now corrected the time flow. That's why our bird flew forwards instead of arse-first." He laughed again, delighted.

Bebn's face showed her fear. "It learns so quickly, alters physical laws so easily? What are we up against? We're utterly in its power."

He sat down on the spongy rock, pulling her down beside him.

"I think it'll be okay. Let's sit and see what the sun does. While we've been talking, I believe it's stopped in its tracks and is now heading towards the west. It all means that the Something is attempting to enter into our temporality, our understanding."

She buried her face in his chest. "It's going to put us on trial. I can just imagine it. We're going to have to go in the witness box for all humanity..."

"Oh no, not to my way of thinking." He smoothed her hair gently. "I believe this amazing thing is looking for company... well - for love, if you'll excuse the expression. At last it's found it is not entirely alone. How'd you feel in such circumstances? Let's stay here and it will give us another sign."

She laughed nervously. "More bi temporality?"

"Of course."

A breeze like a sigh went by them and ruffled the placid waters of the sea. Of a sudden, the rock for miles around was covered waist-high with gorgeous blossoms, velvety and slightly ridiculous. A good first try.

# The Mystique of Landscape

## Gwyneth Jones in conversation with Garry Kilworth

Garry Kilworth is now 50 years of age, and has been writing professionally for 15 years. In that time he has published 13 novels, four children's novels and 71 short stories. His semi-permanent home is in rural Essex, but he has travelled and lived abroad for much of his life. At the time of this interview he was living in Hong Kong, where his wife worked for the schools as a social worker. They have two grownup children, and two grandchildren. He has a passion for the short story, revealed in his collections *The Songbirds of Poin*, and *In the Hollow of the Deep Sea Wave*.

I met Garry for the first time at the English Milford, in 1984. I'd read some of his science-fiction novels, and his stories, and been deeply impressed by the quality of his writing. He produced, that year, a terrific "Nineteen Eighty-Four" story – funny and scary and erudite, and so effortless that my heart sank. I'm a slogger; Garry's work-style couldn't be more different from mine – but I value his opinions and his advice very much indeed. He's a writer who deserves a lot more recognition. He hasn't been published much in the USA, which is their loss, but his irrepressibly varied work is readily available in the UK. I urge you to seek it out and get hold of his novels and stories. We conducted this interview by post, slowly, like a chess game. I hope you all enjoy it. (GJ)

You started fairly late as a writer. It seems as if you'd lived at least one pretty crowded life before you even thought of getting into print. Is this an illusion?

I didn't start late as a writer, but the stuff I'd written up to the age of thirty-something was unpublishable. I'd written a children's fantasy novel, an adult mainstream novel and about two dozen short stories, when I went in for and co-won the 1974 Gollancz/Sunday Times short story competition. I had always wanted to be a writer, had written stories since about twelve, and I guess I was determined to do something in that line.

That winning story, "Let's Go to Golgotha," is an sf story of a particular kind – the pure fable that actually has no science content, though it wouldn't work without the imaginary gadget. So you seem to have started off on the "science as metaphor" side, as against

the "hard extrapolation" – although you've written some pretty straight sf yarns about starship colonists, weird aliens. Was there some element of accident in your becoming an sf writer, was it the strand of the fantastic that just happened to be possessing?

My tastes in reading and writing are very eclectic, with a bent towards the bizarre and a tendency to shy away from science. Most of my work is character based – machines only interest me if they have quirky personalities and I can relate to them as "people." The "straight sf yarns" you mention are still heavily dependent on the characters, alien or human, who drive them along. It wasn't an accident, becoming a writer of sf – I have always been excited by a certain type of science fiction – but it was love of writing that turned me into an author.

The Islamic starship colonists novel – *The Night of Kadar* – that was on absolute tour de force. I admire it immensely. It's so solid in the sf technical detail, and yet deceptively so because – why? We never find out what they're doing there, who sent them. We just watch them invent themselves...

I regard *The Night of Kadar* as my best sf work, though it barely made a ripple in the sf pond. Paul Kincaid called it "that dire novel" in a review at the time. I've never quite forgiven him – though we're good friends now. When I came to write it I was in a period when futility interested me: a kind of Ozymandias thing where someone sets out to create a great work and ends up with something useless. (The causeway in the story). I also liked the idea of having a group of people who were utterly lost – did not know where they were or what they were there for – gradually finding a purpose for themselves. I started the novel with no plot in my head: just the idea of a huge causeway going nowhere; like Alexander the Great's mole which he built to conquer Tyre, that became obsolete before it was completed.

The treatment of the women characters in *Kadar* is pretty devastating – not one moment's relief from the conviction, shored by your women themselves, that they are secondary creations. I don't get this viewpoint from anything else you've written.

The women in *Kadar* are in fact quite

emancipated, if you are familiar with the social and cultural background from which they are derived. To go further than I did would not have been true to the text. There are probably many ways to take a present-day society and extrapolate it, but I prefer to show how I think things would be, rather than how they should, or I would like them to be.

But you do seem to write almost exclusively about masculine culture, obligations, experience...

Yes, I suppose I do write mainly from a masculine viewpoint, perhaps even when the woman is a central character. I know no other way and make no apologies. Usually my male characters are in competition or conflict, while involved in some adventure. It's a situation I find comes naturally to me, though I don't know why it should, and I can understand why you might not enjoy such stories. I think there is tenderness, gentleness and sensitivity there too, especially in such stories as "The River Sailor's Wife," "The Rose Bush," "Beyond Byzantium," and I hope you would agree with that.

The truth is I cannot shake, subconsciously, a 1950s indoctrination which says that men are responsible for women when in a survival situation, which is what most of my stories tend to be about. My wife Annette hates it when we're in some primitive place and I'm "herding" her, as she calls it. If I write about masculine cultures it comes from somewhere deeper than my conscious self, because I don't set out to do it deliberately.

But what about the technical part of sf? That's a "mole" province, which you don't seem to take too seriously. I once heard you say, on a panel, that there's no need to be poronoid (I porophrose) about plausible science. Whatever crazy idea you come up with, some scientist will have done a paper on it.

I'm impressed by some of the science in science fiction, but relate best to pseudo-science – Bob Shaw's "Slow Glass," racial memory, that sort of thing – science that ought to or may indeed work, but is still considered quirky. Psychological science, social science, these are closer to my heart.

Do you think you could expand on it?

Social science is seen at work in

Cloudrock and Theatre of Timesmiths. Also in the latter is an example of what I mean by psychological science. You have some place which has never been seen by any living soul – a place behind a wall, perhaps. Before this place is actually revealed to human eyes, it is whatever you wish it to be, in any of an infinite variety of forms. In the novel no one has seen the real world outside the concentration camp, and before they do, any scene they care to believe exists in the real world, actually does exist – until that time comes when the real world is revealed.

**W**hich were the books that turned you on to sf?

Mostly short stories, the Penguin SF anthologies, stories like "Who Can Replace a Man?", "Arena," "The Ruum," "Grandpa" and "The Law Waggon," and dozens of others by writers whose names have slipped my memory. Certain novels too, like Aldiss's *Hothouse* and *Nonstop*, and all of Ray Bradbury's work – which, as a youth, I wanted to emulate. Richard Cowper's *Clone*, Clarke's *Ramô* novel, Silverberg's *Nightwings*. The trouble is, they're all at home in England, where I can't get at them. They still excite me when I think about them.

But you also write fantasy, and you write for children, and you write poetry, and you write sort of mainstream novels.

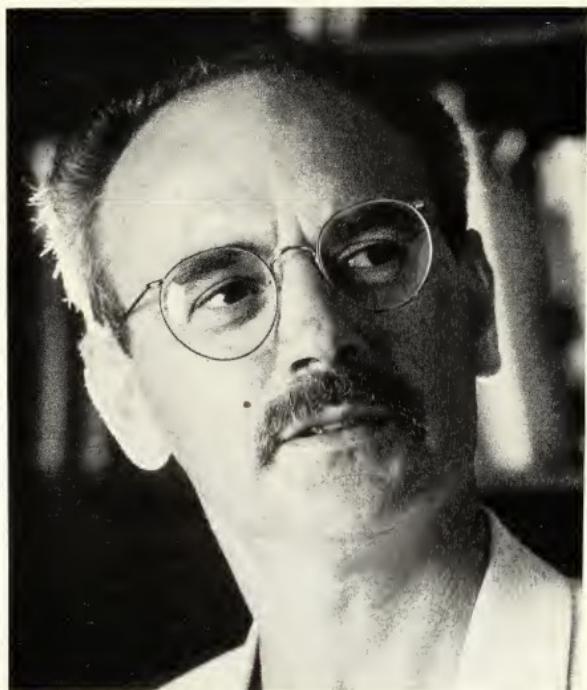
The idea governs the form, that's how it works. The thing that I want to write about is best dealt with by a certain genre or form. If you've got a promiscuous imagination which mates with any willing participant it meets in the wood, you get variety before constancy. But I think this works against me. Specialists are taken more seriously than those who diversify. Followers are more easily gathered under one banner.

You're regarded, you're notorious among British sf writers, as a nonstop powerhouse of short story ideas. What's the shortest time it's ever taken you to think of and write and finish a story you were pleased with?

I keep notebooks (of ideas) but the way it works is this: something grabs my attention, it need only be an odd phrase, which acts as a key to unlock something in my head. I don't know what or why, and an idea jumps out. I write that idea down and use it when I'm ready for it, or it's ready for me. I wrote "Let's Go to Golgotha" in two hours, while sitting in a car waiting for someone to finish a game of golf.

You should write a story so if it concerns only the characters involved. That's advice you once gave to me (I know this is a quotation from a Spanish-American writer, I don't know which).

Julio Cortázar was the writer. Argentinian born, lived and died in Paris.



Garry Kilworth

Wrote "Blow Up." He said you should write a story from its centre. I've never fully understood what he meant by this, but the way I apply it is that you begin with the core of the tale and write around it, allowing the story to form its own body around a heart. The final creation is likely to be something more original than if you start by envisaging what you want it to look like when it's finished, and then fill the shell. A story written from the inside will only concern the characters involved; it will create its own internal logic.

I'm not sure what "magical realism" is. But things happen in your stories which are strong, without the intervention (if you see what I mean) of a declared fantastic system. It's like on imagined world but with secret rules...

Magical realism to me means "skewed realities" where it seems very like the real world, but characters are idiosyncratic and their behaviour, which seems normal to them, causes you to feel uneasy. I guess you're right – an imagined world with different rules – and the reader has to discover the rules.

The private imagined world, that each person has, mode manifest in the story for each character?

In my short story "Spiral Sands" (née "Spiral Winds") there is no actual magic but a cyclic chain of events, a spiralling destiny, becomes evident – which the characters in the story remain unsurprised by, but which the reader finds quite strange. In Middle-Earth fantasy, the magic is up-front and is recognizable immediately for what it is. In stories like "Spiral Sands" the magic is going on somewhere behind the story, like the weather and evolution, but otherwise things seem quite normal.

Just as there was science fiction around before the term was invented, magical realism doesn't belong exclusively to the South Americans. The North American writer Carson McCullers is one of my all-time favourites, and it was the magic and the reality of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* that turned me on to her work.

**W**hich do you enjoy more – writing short stories or writing novels?

I like writing short stories more than I like writing novels. The short form comes to me more naturally, and also I'm an impatient writer and novels seem to go on forever. Perhaps it's because of my erratic nature that I like variety too.

There's a Canadian sensibility in your stories and novels. I don't mean the exotic, manly adventure settings. I mean you have a way of invoking a milieu which seems very intimate as well as very romantic, but when I, the reader, look for the writer's viewpoint, that voice seems always to be that of an outsider to the world he's describing so knowingly.

I'm not very good at analysing my own work or reasons for doing certain things with it but yes, I see the writer as being the figure on the periphery, only becoming involved when circumstances force the issue. Naturally the outsider is interested mostly in people like himself, because he wants to understand himself. I'm uncomfortable with insider characters: they're too knowing, too competent, too much in command of themselves and others.

Like Ohman in *Kadar* - and yet he was an outsider in his way. I can't think of a book or a story of yours that isn't on a human scale, however bizarre. You invent really weird futures, like the world of "Hogfoot Right," where the flotilla old lady has her feet and hands converted into pets - on the National Health, or something like it. Then you investigate a tiny corner, no bigger than your characters can personally handle.

I wouldn't know where to start on a galactic-scale novel, let alone a cosmic one. I imagine you have to step back a thousand miles and move characters like chess pieces. You have to work from above, like a god, and stay in control. I'd go to pieces. A military friend once said I'd make a good lieutenant but a lousy general. I have to get to know each character personally. If I held a gathering of all the characters I've ever created, it would be a small cocktail party, most of them paranoids.

Can you envisage a whole novel in *Hogfoot Right's* world?

No. The story is self-contained. To me it is the whole world.

Could you talk a bit about how you come to write a particular book, how much you plan?

I start with the central idea and build around it, asking questions and trying to answer them. "In the Hollow of the Deep Sea Wave" for example, began with musing on an "inherited responsibility" theme: What about a society where an official of the state inherits not only the results of his predecessor's term in office but the responsibility for all his actions? This went right down to the lowest level, so the new schoolteacher finds he has unwittingly inherited responsibility for a murder he did not personally commit. I start with notes, about an A4-size sheet of them, but no written plan though there's quite a comprehensive blueprint in my head. My kids used to tell people who caught me staring into

space for hours on end. "Dad's working..." These days, I do write synopses, but for the publisher, not for me.

Do you "see" the action in your stories? Sometimes there's a very cinematic feel. Is that the way it comes, like watching an unfolding dream and then trying to write it down? That's something I always find odd: the relationship between a story - which is drama - and little black marks on paper...

I was raised, or raised myself, on a diet of two or three films a week. These days I watch at least four or five films a week, sometimes more. I love the cinema, though strangely I feel no desire to write film scripts. So the answer is, yes, my thoughts are very visual and I run the action through like a film in my head, using words to describe what I see and experience.

Me too! Like Borthes says: for *Balzac* it was pictures. That vital connection doesn't exist anymore, for us literature and cinema feed off each other... There's a book of yours dedicated to a long-running film option that never came off: any other nibbles?

I've had film options on *The Night of Kador*, *Witchwater Country*, "The Man Who Collected Bridges" and "In the Hollow of the Deep Sea Wave" - the last one is still in force and filming is supposed to be starting in the Maldives next spring. As for nibbles, Bette Midler and Disney studios were supposed to be interested, separately, in *Hunter's Moon*, but that's from hearsay.

But what about the fox story, and its sequel? It's quite a jump from "The Deep Sea Wave" or *Abandonati* (the one where the tramps and down-and-outs wake up to find all the proper people have vanished, leaving them alone in the world) to *Hunter's Moon*. What inspired you to write a book about talking animals?

Yes, what about the talking vermin books? I haven't yet come to terms with them myself. What are they? I struggle with conflicting emotions here, worrying about originality, ready to defend their place in the world, but still concerned about anthropomorphizing. Although there have been talking animal books around since Aesop, there have been relatively few of them. ("Rikki Tikki Tavi", *Wind in the Willows*, *Farthing Wood*, *Brer Rabbit*, *Doctor Rat*, *Animal Farm*: mostly pre-Watership Down). The public does not yet see them as a genre, and while they are ready to accept that many authors write spy thrillers, or vampire novels, they have the feeling that anyone who writes about talking animals is "copying" Richard Adams. I write them because I love getting into that secret world of nature, privy really only to a few naturalists with infinite patience. There are plenty of poets who love it

too: Andrew Young, Ted Hughes, Emily Dickinson. Putting thoughts into the heads of other creatures is no different from putting words into their mouths. What's the difference between specifying animals and doing the same with aliens, monsters, ghosts, even other human beings - sociopaths? Which author knows how a sociopath thinks? I don't think it's a big jump from *Abandonati* to *Hunter's Moon* - they're both about fellow creatures trying to survive in a dangerous world.

Could you say more about *Abandonati* - your only "near-future" novel, and a pretty odd future...

*Abandonati* is not supposed to be prophetic, it's supposed to be a "what if" novel - what if the divide between the rich and poor were to continue in the direction it is taking at the moment. I'm not saying "this is how the world will end up," but "would the world end up this way?" It's a question, not a warning.

Does the dominant theory of sf os fortune-telling bother you: I mean, sf readers always seem to have difficulty with the undefined, they want to know is this supposed to be a "real" future; is this supposed to be a "real" other planet?

I personally do not like the idea of prophetic science fiction. One may make guesses about the future which may be all right, partly right or simply wrong, but it is the quality of the fiction that is important, not some half-baked forecast of tomorrow's world. I hate it when people hold up books like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and point out the "right" bits, as if this is what makes the novel great.

You seem to like taking on an "alien" viewpoint (foxes, tormps, Moslem starship passengers, whatever) and never once dropping out of character, or slipping into an authorial voice. Do you do this sort of thing technically, going back and erasing every bit of "normal" viewpoint that's slipped through? Or do you get it right first time?

I'm an anachronism, I suppose. In this age of cinema and video the position of the literary novelist is somewhere to one side of visual entertainment, attempting to remain aloof from it, and most writers can ascertain their standpoint, categorize themselves, from that position. I can't do it. I write a wide variety of fiction - which, as I've said before, does not help the sales of my books. What I am is an old-fashioned campfire storyteller, and I tell many different kinds of stories. But I should add that in making this claim I also believe the storyteller to be the priest of fiction, not in any way inferior to the literary novelist. I say this because there are those who think the storyteller a simple writer, with limited

skills, which is a long way from the truth. The skills are in the versatility of the theme and the changing shape of the stories. The storyteller is the narrator within the story, as well as the writer, and therefore takes the central viewpoint. To answer your question, I don't erase anything. I do it the first time round, intuitively. I hope that doesn't sound too arrogant because it's not clever of me, just a natural instinct like hitting a ball at tennis.

You're not a very urban person, are you? But not a wilderness nut either. When you're in the UK you live from choice in a place where paved roads and mains drainage fear to tread; and yet it's not in the middle of a National Park, it's rural Essex, the last bolthole for shady Londoners: very foxy, really.

Yes, I like to live in the countryside and am lucky to be in touch with a town. I don't like cities and have never willingly lived in them. Ashingdon, the village of my grandfather, just happens to be near London. My part of Essex is not a pretty place, with its bleak marshes, the windswept dingles, hidden creeks, gypsy scrap-metal merchants and retired London gangsters. But it has a kind of sinister charm, as if the Dark Ages have never quite left. The stones of old keeps are still breathing, as their towers sink slowly into the bog.

And yet now you're in Hong Kong, and you're writing stories about Hong Kong.

Even in Hong Kong we are literally the last row of apartments before the countryside starts – in front, the city, behind, the mountains. Hong Kong is actually two-thirds wilderness, believe it or not. I guess I am a marginal person.

And you've written about Lawrence and the Desert myth, you've written about alienation in the South Seas... It seems as if place is very important to you, place and the roots of a place: but anywhere will do.

The spirit, the numinous of the landscape, is very important to me. Part of it is the refined memory process, whereby you allow yourself to recall some (especially childhood) feeling about a place. You become receptive to what the place felt like, the spirit of the desert or jungle or English woodland – and what you get is the distilled essence of many mornings, afternoons, evenings, nights, in one remembrance. I'm one of what my wife calls Third Culture children, of which she has made a special study. It means I spent the formative years of my childhood in a culture other than that of my parents, and the two influences, in my case English and Arabian, have mixed inseparably to form a third culture – not Christian, not Moslem, but a mixture of both. I have a love of the desert, because it was my childhood playground. I woke to the sound of muezz-

zins, not church bells. My childhood friends were some Arab, some Caucasian, some Indian, and obviously they all influenced me in some way. This is probably where the outsider comes from: when I eventually returned to England I didn't seem to fit. Then at 17 I went to live in Singapore, which had a whole new set of heady experiences, not so strongly influencing as the Arabian ones because I was approaching maturity, but certainly impressive. I feel very charged when I drop backwards in time and reach out emotionally for Arabia, or Singapore or the Maldives. A wash of unimportant nostalgia goes through me, but it carries with it more important feelings.

**Y**ou joined the Army, very young. The horrors of military life turn up in some of your stories. What about the good?

Not Army, but Air Force. I was in the Royal Air Force. It may not seem as if there is any difference between the two from the outside, but from the inside, they're worlds apart. The good? Apart from the travel? I liked the order and the cleanliness of the environment. I liked belonging to a Family which looked after you. I liked being appreciated for doing a good job (they reward you with recognition for work well done, and you get plenty of feedback). I felt comfortable and secure, having been raised as an air force child and then entered the service while my pa was still a member. I spoke the language from year dot, knew all the secret and unwritten rules by the age of five, and indeed I knew nothing else but service life until the age of 35.

Then there was the bad, of which my fiction speaks volumes: the gungho macho-men, the idea of killing people, the separation from family, the systematic destruction of personality, the bullshit, the discipline et al. The services think they can make a better job than God of constructing a human being, so they take one of His creations, break it down and rebuild it in their own image – which stinks. The best part of a serviceman is the bit of his old self he has managed to hide and keep from the system.

You write a considerable amount of fiction that's consciously drawing on autobiographical material (settings, experience); and I don't think you do that purely for the travelogue. How do you – how does a writer – put your own life to use; and how does this element fuse with "pure invention"? Like *Spiral Winds*... It's a kind of mystical adventure in the desert and, as you said, the Arabian desert partly made you what you are.

No, I don't use these places purely for the travelogue, I use them because the spirits of those landscapes, the people and cultures, captivated my interest and affection. The same goes

for coral islands, jungles and English marshlands. If a certain type of person spends long enough in these places, their mystique draws him or her in, and the seduction process lasts for the rest of a lifetime. I use these places because I knew them, have a fondness for them, and because they spawn a certain type of plot. There are parts of *Spiral Winds* that are fictionalized life experience, such as when one of the characters is lost in the desert. When I was 12 years of age, a friend and I were doing our Journey – a task set for Boy Scouts. It involves a long hike, using maps and compass. We were sent out into the Hadhramaut desert, but the maps were not accurate, one or two things went wrong, and the result was two teenagers lost in the desert for two days, most of which time we were without water. This experience affected me quite profoundly, and my memories of it are to an extent mystical and surreal, since we were half out of our heads some of the time. In *Spiral Winds* (and in other stories) only the essence of the experience is used, as a core and layered with fiction, but the real experience (as I remember it) is told raw in a new autobiographical novel, *Standing on Shamsan* (recently published by HarperCollins). The only other work in which I have used raw memories, is *Witchwater Country*. For some reason I find it easier to fictionalize real-life experience, than to tell it as it was. The fictionalized version always looks more real to me than what I remember as actually happening, which feels like a childhood dream rather than a childhood experience.

**W**itchwater Country is possibly my favourite of your books. It has the murkiness (I'd say darkness, but that's far too clear-cut for the Essex marshes, or the mind of a ten-year-old) of a child's perceptions; the savagery, and the oblique glimpses of adult life. It's a book that's honest about childhood, but it isn't a children's book – maybe for just that reason. What about writing for children? There seem to be rules, taboos, obligations that we wouldn't impose on ourselves for an adult audience.

It worries me that we have the temerity to make up different rules for children than for ourselves. We treat children as if they were a different species, when they're just an earlier version of us, with no distinct dividing lines. We're actually attempting to protect them from themselves at a later age. When I write for teenagers the only change I make is to cut out all the crap and get right down to the storytelling. That says something about adult books.

*Witchwater Country* verges on horror writing – it was marketed as horror by someone, wasn't it? – without going (much) beyond the bounds of ordinary

kids' makebelieve round the back of the houses. It's the dissolving feel it invokes. Those marshes — a place where things begin to fall apart. You have a story narrator say, (in "The Filming of the Filming of Fitzcoraldo") that all our urge to get to the centre, right down into the depths where truth lies, is an illusion — that we're disastrously mistaken about that. That voice goes on to say something like — in fact the margin, the edges, is where we grow and live. But there remains the image of the fragmenting close-up, where meaning is destroyed by too close a contact: as if that could be all there is. And the story ends in such a way as to support that view. Do you ever want to write real horror, undiluted vertigo (Conrad again), no way back out of the swamp? Do you think it would be possible to do that, in today's mode of gore and moggots?

I have written horror fiction but (and this is going to sound prim) I think horror fiction has become so decadent and has indulged itself so deeply in violence, the readers have become saturated with sensationalism and now only a sharp stick rammed in the eyeball has any effect. This affects the quality of fiction. When the subtleties are dispensed with and the need for internal logic has lost its place to special effects, what else is left but to go for more body-violence? No one cares whether or not it makes sense that insane field mice gather in vast hordes to tear the tongues out of new-born babes, so long as it's done graphically. What I would like to know is, what is this fictional argument called *EVIL*, which seems to have no meaningful motive force behind it beyond the arrangement of its letters into a word which people think they recognize? Nowadays there's usually little difference between ghost stories and horror stories — they both end in gore. It's not rebellious, cultish or shocking anymore. It's boring.

You may be an outsider, but you have your own strong beliefs.

I'm a religious man. I can't deal with it intellectually, it doesn't make logical sense, so I accept it emotionally. I was raised a Methodist, fire-and-brimstone stuff, but abandoned it on reaching maturity. Then when I had a family I found myself turning to God in moments of crisis and I thought, if I'm a believer when the chips are down, I should pay a bit more attention when things are going well. The mystical is important to me and I don't care to explain it too much. I don't like evangelizing: most of my friends are atheists, and if that's the way they see things I wouldn't want to press my beliefs on them. They've got free minds, they can make them up for themselves. I don't know where I am in party politics. I just want the good guys in, safe streets,

no wars, no desperately poor, good education, good medical service and no national boundaries. Is that too much to ask?

**Y**ou took a degree as a mature student. Was that a hard decision? How did you know you wanted to do it? Do you value academic education highly?

I was educated to secondary-modern standard (in those days it meant no leaving exams) at 20 different schools, and then ejected into the world just before my 15th birthday. I was expected to go into the Air Force and rise to the heady rank of sergeant. I did that and at the age of 25, said "What else?" So I took GCSEs by correspondence course, got the necessary entrance qualifications for university, and went to college at 27, to do a business degree. I found I liked education. It gave me the confidence to write. Went back at 40 and did an English degree. School wasn't fun, but adult education is. I'd do some more if I had the time.

Before you got into print yourself, did you see writers as god-like beings, doing something impossible to ordinary mortals?

When I met other writers for the first time I felt as if I'd found the gate to the secret garden. They talked about writing, they lived and breathed the stuff of life. There were even some gods there — Brian Aldiss, Bob Shaw, John Brunner, Richard Cowper, Harry Harrison — and they didn't squash me like a bug. Withstanding criticism of my work was like being on the apparatus in the penal colony, but it was worth it to be in such company. This contact was enormously important to me, and I think if I'd worked in isolation, I would still be struggling with a few rhyming couplets and trying to get them into a small poetry magazine.

I've got a slim volume of your poems, and I like them a lot. Would you like to get more published?

I don't write poetry now, apart from the odd one a year. Poetry is a young writer's forte. You need fresh enthusiastic eyes through which to view the world. You need to breathe a clearer, cleaner air. I would like to publish a lot more of the poetry of my younger years, which lies a-mouldering in my desk drawers.

All the "gods" were UK writers, but one. What do you think of American sf?

The difference between UK and USA sf is the difference between an insular small-island long-dark-historied race and a continental collection of brave-new-worlders. The language is the same (almost) but the cultures are an ocean and a history apart. Most British sf comes out of the gentle pessimism of H.G. Wells, we know, whereas I believe American sf comes not from Poe, who had a dark suicidal mid-

European denseness, but from writers like Mark Twain, with his open swashbuckling Connecticut Yankee hero. American sf looks outwards, British sf looks inwards — generally.

All American sf isn't like that.

I did qualify my opinion, and of course one can look in detail at many exceptions. I read Stan Robinson (Kim Stanley Robinson) a lot, some of Lucius Shepard, Gene Wolfe, Pat Murphy. Science fiction/contemporary fantasy forms about 20 percent of my total reading. On the whole I don't read Tolkien/S&S fantasy, but that's my loss I expect. I once read a Larry Niven story about the end of magic (in his brilliant collection *Inconstant Moon*) and thought it superb, so I do read a little medieval fantasy.

Are you for pure art, or whatever the market will bear?

I'm not sure I know what pure art is. I like to experiment with form, language, shape. Sometimes it works, sometimes it's a private or a public failure. I don't believe in rules for fiction. That leads to stagnation. In the same way I don't believe in judging literature by the nature of its content, but by the quality of the writing. I get very angry when I hear a writer of literary novels putting down genre works: that's a display of ignorance.

Do you hunger for recognition — for yourself, as well as generically?

The short answer is, yes. My sf profile is quite low, probably because of my love of variety. My non-sf works receive more attention. If just one of my short stories were to be held up as a lasting achievement, it would give me a great deal of satisfaction, as it would any writer, I am sure. I've never won any awards for my writing, apart from the one that started me off, though I've been runner-up many times. I think I'm fated to come in second, and for that reason I have formed the firm opinion that awards are useless things given to popinjays and yahoos, and I want nothing to do with them ... unless I win one.

What's next? You've mentioned Standing on Shamsan...

There's a historical novel for young adults called *The Drowners*, a ghost story set in 1835, around Winchester. [*The Drowners* was shortlisted for the Smarties Prize, and is currently shortlisted for the Carnegie, the most prestigious award for British children's fiction — GJ.] In the works is a supernatural thriller for Gollancz, a novel on hares, a mainstream novel called *The Brontë Girls* (about a man in the 1950s who raises his three daughters in the belief that they are living in the 19th century). This may sound a lot, but it covers the next three years. There's also a collection of sf/fantasy stories called *In The Country of Tat-*

Concluded on page 47

# Are There Any Questions?

## Terry Bisson

Welcome.

I'm glad to see you all looking so alert, so eager, so prosperous this morning. I promise you that at the end of our little talk and tour, you'll be even more eager, and potentially more prosperous, because you didn't come here to be entertained. You came here to get in on the ground floor, and ground is a good word for it, of the most unique investment opportunity since the opening of the American West.

So let's get down to the nitty gritty, as my grandad used to say. We're here to talk about something people don't usually like to talk about. Even though there's plenty of it around. Last year, in 1999, the average family in the New York metropolitan area produced 157.4 pounds of it in a week. This comes to 645,527 cubic yards of it a day, or – uncompacted – an Empire State building every 16.4 days or a truckload every six and a half minutes.

What in the world is he talking about? Well, we all know, don't we? You there, madam, on the second row. I can see your lips forming the very word itself.

But you're wrong.

I'm not talking about garbage. Not any more. I'm talking about real estate. I'm talking about land.

"Land," my grandad used to say, "is the only sure-fire investment there is, because God's not making any more of it."

He was right about it being a sure-fire investment. But he was wrong about why. Because even though God's not making any more of it, we at Eden-Prudential are. But I don't have to tell you folks that. That's why you're here.

I see some of you are getting your calculators out. Good. Let's look at those numbers again. 11,987,058 cubic metres of solid waste, and that's what we can collect, process, transport and place in a month, can, in the right hands, translate to a quarter acre of beautiful mountain-view property, or sixteen feet of ocean front. Notice I say "in the right hands." That's where Eden-Prudential comes in. Even as you and I speak, EP's trucks are running and EP's barges are under sail. We have four fleets of 138 trucks apiece – all independent contractors, by the way; real mom 'n' pop types – operating from our catchment and processing centre on Staten Island. Every eighteen minutes sees five trucks dispatched, three to south Jersey, and two to Montauk; all working around the clock to make America not only more prosperous than ever, but a little bit bigger. And more valuable.

**B**ut enough poetry. Let's talk opportunity. What area produces the most solid waste in the world, per square mile of already existing land? The New York metropolitan area. And what area contains the world's most valuable real estate? Or to put it another way: is there any other place in the world where land is in such short supply and where people are so willing – not to mention able – to pay for it?

Again, you just can't beat the New York area.

A surplus of garbage. A shortage of land. Put those two facts together in the right equation, and you come up with what we at EP call IP, or Investment Potential. But it was only potential, and potential only, until the invention of the Eden Land Developer, the solid waste transformer that turns ordinary garbage of any kind, shape, or origin, into quality, consistent, durable real estate.

If you will be kind enough to take one of the foil-wrapped souvenir samples Miss Crumb is passing around the room... Go ahead, open it. It's going to make you rich. Don't be afraid of getting your hands dirty because you won't. Does it look like dirt? Not with that attractive gold colour, it doesn't. It's Eden Earth. Go ahead, sniff it. Taste it if you want to. My great great grandad was a farmer, God rest his soul, out in Iowa, I think it was, and he never judged a piece of land without putting a piece of it on his tongue.

No takers. Well, I understand.

You can take my word for it: what you hold in your hand is a piece of solid waste that has been not only recycled but reconstituted, not to mention eye and odour enhanced, to make an earth that is the equal to, and in many ways actually superior to, the earth that the Earth itself is made of.

Do I see eyebrows lifting?

Well, try to crumble it. This cookie doesn't crumble. Dunk it – it's water resistant and therefore it doesn't turn into mud. You'll notice it doesn't soil your hands or stain your shirt. Its epoxy polymer additives mean that smells and stains are locked in, and that once we put it in place it stays there – it doesn't dry up and blow away like the Great Plains in the dust bowl, or wash away like the beaches of Long Island in a hurricane. Eden Earth is real estate, in the true, Biblical meaning of the word, not ephemeral dirt and dust that is dependent on every caprice of Nature.

But people who know Real Estate – and I can see that you are all professionals in the field – know that

the value of land depends on its location. We at Eden-Prudential not only collect and process Eden Earth by the tons every day; we truck and barge it to the areas where people want to be. The locations people are most hungry for and most willing to pay big money for. We're creating the kind of real estate that is in short supply and high demand.

A home in the mountains. A home by the sea.

**E**d-en-Prudential is making America grow, with two areas currently under development. In the no-longer barren Pine Barrens of south Jersey, our environmental designers are right now putting the finishing touches on an attractive range of small mountains called the Crestfills. Miss Crumb, could we have the first video please? The magnificent peak in the background is Eden Peak. It soars to an elevation of 2,670 feet, almost a thousand feet higher than any other mountain in New Jersey, and over half again the height of Fresh Kills Peak on Staten Island.

Eden Peak's lovely summit is a nature preserve. If you want to see the breath-taking view from the top, as we're seeing it here on video, you'll have to park your 4X4 and walk up one of our beautiful nature trails - the first trails I might add that were planned and built along with a mountain, not added as an afterthought.

Of more interest to yourselves, as brokers and developers, are the winding drives along the crest of Atlantic City Ridge, so named because it overlooks the light of that great capitol of chance only 45 minutes away by car. The three planned neighbourhoods here - Eaglefill Estates, Hawkfill Glade, and Baronfill Manor - will be open to the public in October, and sold through selected brokers only. Our hope is that you will be among them.

The foundation for another quality ridge is even now being laid to the west, nearer to Philadelphia.

There will be those who will want to live in the Crestfills year-round, but for most these will be vacation homes, hideaways for busy executives who want to lay aside the world's cares and communicate with nature. And here in the Crestfill Mountains, nature is at its best. Your clients will hear birds singing winter and summer. They are drawn to the Crestfills not only by the pleasant pine scent, renewed monthly, but by the fact that the mountainsides are warmed several degrees by the gentle internal action of Eden Earth as it ages, making the Crestfills a unique and precious winter wildlife sanctuary.

These pine-covered slopes, with their cunningly spaced "rocky" outcrops - there's one right now - were created by a team of environmental designers who spared no expense, even dropping fill from container-copters to create those hard-to-reach spots that give wilderness areas their special appeal. Free-range deer and even an occasional bear roam the rugged slopes. There's a deer now. Put it on "pause," Miss Crumb, and let's have another look. How many here are old enough to remember the original *Bambi*? How many took their children to see it? Their grandchildren?

Me too.

**B**ut suppose your clients and prospective buyers dream of a home by the sea? What if Fire Island, Cape Cod, Nantucket are the kind of names that fire their souls and loosen their cheques?

How does Bayfill Island sound to you?

If we may, Miss Crumb, let's cut away to our second video, and another type of paradise - a rocky, fog-bound New England-style island of the kind featured in so many romantic movies. How many of you have dreamed of the opportunity to buy and sell summer homes on one of these exclusive sites? Well, hang on - your dreams are about to come true.

Bayfill Island lies at the opening of Long Island Sound, between Montauk and one of the older glacial debris islands, Block Island. It is by comparing Bayfill with the rather run-down - geologically speaking - islands in the area, that we can best understand why we say Eden Earth puts standard earth to shame. Large areas of Nantucket Island are carved away by the ocean waves every winter - valuable real estate becoming silt and sand in the ocean deeps. Not so on Bayfill Island. Since Eden Earth is both salt and water resistant, it stands firm against the weather. Large areas of Martha's Vineyard are swamps and marshes, filled with vicious insects. In contrast, there are no wastelands on Bayfill Island, where all the land is dry land and rain runs off as clear and clean as when it fell. Large areas of Block Island are out of sight and sound of the ocean, drastically lowering property values. On ingeniously S-shaped Bayfill Island, every property is ocean front property; there are no "cheap seats" in the house.

But enough poetry. It's time to go and see for ourselves. Miss Crumb has just signalled me that Eden-Prudential's chartered airbus has arrived to take us on our tour of the two sites. We only have to walk a block to board. As you leave the office here, we'll be crossing the East 34th St. Extension. Watch your step; the ground is still a little springy.

Are there any questions?

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**Terry Bisson** is a rising American writer (see Gregory Feeley's interview with him in Interzone 40), winner of all the major sf and fantasy awards last year for his story "Bears Discover Fire" (first published in Isaac Asimov's SF Magazine). His novels are *Worldmaker* (1981), *Talking Man* (1986), *Fire on the Mountain* (1988) and *Voyage to the Red Planet* (1990; this last is just out in Britain after some delay, from Pan Books). He lives in New York.

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# Children of a Greater God

## Julian Flood

**I**t was amateur night in Rosie's Bar and big Jinks Hammer had cut out his heart for the audience. They were laughing fit to bust a blood-vessel or two of their own as he fell to his knees, pitched forwards off the stage and landed in the lap of a startled punter. It was a classy gathering. All the stars of the late-night crowd were there, the one who could afford the really expensive rebuild needed if they were caught by the sun, the ones with their own private meat wagons ghosting behind them as they prowled the edge of dawn. They loved his act. Or at least they loved the ending.

One of the bar robots put a shunt into his chest and dragged him through the back door to where the rubbish waited for collection. Jinks was just coming to consciousness as its metal arms loaded him onto the ambulance. Nice of the club, he thought, there was no need to do that. He lay waiting while the collectors gathered together more stiffs, trying to control his damaged body, ignoring the shrieking signals from his chest. The robots were taking their time, stacking their dead and comatose customers one by one, chattering to each other in the high-pitched squeaks they used among themselves. The wagon was almost full when Sonja drifted up to the door at the rear, an inevitable cigarette hanging from her full, red-painted lips. Her face wavered when he looked up at her inverted features. His eyes were failing.

"Your sign-off was great, Jinksy. If you cut out the political crap about the Company, stay with the knockabout, you can have yourself a job. I need a new comic. Deal?"

"Deal," he croaked as she slammed the door. He couldn't say more. He had been dead too long and a whole mass of his neural circuits had failed. One of his hands twitched spastically as the vehicle jolted over the potholed roads, unloading bodies here and there. He had gone fully blind by now but he knew where he was, tracking the rhythm of the wheels. Next stop Megahotel.

His brain was still working at full pitch. All the way to his cubicle he thought about the world, how it stank, how he hated the Company, hated what it had done to them all, hated being marooned in this hell. But no-one cared. Even Sonja D. didn't care. Only Jinks cared, cursing in his tight metal coffin as it bumped through the streets of Night City.

**D**ub's Planet was no place for a man. Scorching him by day, savaging him with hydroxyl radicals at night, it tried in a thousand ways to tear him apart. Even breathing hurt. Every day his body had to be rebuilt cell by cell, the machines repairing the damage of the previous night, readying him for another eight hours of torture. Sometimes Jinks remembered what he had been told of Earth with its twelve hours of night and he shuddered, unable to bear the thought of consciousness longer than the brief night of Dub.

In the old days, when the metal flowed off-planet and the Company grew fat, the inhabitants could see some point to the suffering. Now the only things they had was unlimited power from the solar arrays and unlimited time. And pain. They had a lot of pain. Maybe they would live forever as a reward for suffering, renewed eternally by the resurrection machines, but it was a prospect that filled them with no pleasure. They were never rebuilt from the ground up. One day it might happen, if the techniques of DNA synthesis improved, or at least got cheaper. Then, instead of grubbing for cells in their corpses, the machines could build them new bodies from raw chemicals, ingredients which would hold no imprint of death after death after death. One day, but not yet. Somehow, as he gagged over another lethal lungful of air, Jinks reckoned even the chance of eternity wasn't enough.

The business as a comic had started out as a bet, but the more Jinks thought about it the more he realized it made ideal cover. Most jobs in his real trade were simple trace and returns, looking for wives on the lam, kids trying to go to the bad in a city that was all bad. Rosie's Bar was central, the most popular venue in town. As resident comic he would have the perfect excuse for hanging around. Besides, he found that he had real talent.

**T**he meat wagon pulled up outside his bolthole and negotiated for a few seconds with the hotel mind, checking he had a reservation. Then it unloaded him. The handling robot was not particularly gentle; it knew he would soon be dead. The Megahotel cubicle was only just big enough for his frame and it felt cold as he was shoved into place. His clothes were ripped to ribbons by whirling blades, sucked away to be remade and to wait for night. Jinks

lay naked, shaking with terror. The door closed behind him. At once the machine began to break him down. It happened quickly.

First the brain. His thoughts echoed oddly as the hotel resonated his nerves, checking for updates, rewriting the data holos labelled Jinks Hammer. Jinks had missed being updated only once. His brain had been mashed to jelly in an accident and the rebuilders had been unable to ream out his memories. They had ended up using the old records, skipping one whole day.

He still resented the loss of that date. It was almost as if it had been stolen from him, secreted somewhere by the dispassionate memory of Dub. Each morning in his cubicle, in this brief instant while he waited to die, he thought the same thing: something had been stolen from him. It was a wasted thought. He would never remember this moment, although it was repeated day after day. His memories had already been taken to the Company store and no new thoughts or sensations could survive what happened next. So it didn't matter to the machines if they hurt him. The blades moved closer, opening pathways. A million tiny fingers reached into his body, plucking at his cells, shredding his meat and bone and nervous tissue down to sludge. When the metal hands ripped out the shunt that was keeping him alive he screamed and fell into an infinite whiteout of agony. Finally there was peace.

Cell by cell he was grown again, struggling up the ladder of evolution as the City cowered under the lash of daylight, flayed by the rays of its green sun. Bone cells replicated, heart muscle regenerated, nerves fissioned and grew. The machine spun and wove another perfect remake Jinks from the pool of slurry that he had become, dumped the censored memories of his life into his rebuilt brain, and held him comatose until nightfall.

**H**is body didn't seem to fit very well. He could feel a needle diffusing through his skull and tendrils of steel scraped against the bone of his eye sockets. When he tried to move, a white-hot bolt crackled down his back, knifed into his head. Pain, nothing but pure and total pain. He thought, as he thought each evening, "I wish that I was dead and buried, dead and buried, dead and buried," whispering the mantra as a shield against his suffering. It was too much to bear.

A needle jabbed into his arm. The electricity faded, dying long and slow along his nerves, drifting gentle and soft out of his fingertips, oozing from between his distorted lips. He was himself again. Alive. Alive! Porcelain was freezing beneath him. He even remembered his name. Jinks Hammer yawned and switched off the alarm. It switched itself back on.

"You have five minutes to leave this cubicle. Insert your hand into the slot to the right of your slab if you wish to reserve occupancy for another day. Ten credits will be deducted from your basic allowance. If not, Megahotel repair facilities thank you for using us. Next time your body needs rebuilding or a friend needs dragging from the dead, remember Megahotel. You have four minutes fifty seconds..."

He lay still for another minute, calculating the odds. If he found the Shaunessey girl tonight he'd get her

back to the judge and rate an advance, perhaps a bonus. Then, after his act, he could get into a decent boneyard, maybe even afford to book into the Atun Resurrection Parlour itself. He would wake up on marble for a change. Daren't risk being caught without a bolthole though. He tried to work it out logically.

She'd been gone four days. If she was dead it was going to be a full rebuild, some parts of her body needing growing from just a few cells. It could take weeks, even with the machinery that the judge could afford. If she was alive her brain would need rewriting, deleting the memories of her defiance. The longer his search went on the less he'd earn in bonus. If it went beyond a week the judge might go to another agency. His methods were known to be rough—Jinks wouldn't realize he'd been fired until a disruptor came out of the dark behind the spotlights. But how could he hurry?

He only had one lead. She'd last been seen in Rosie's Bar and he had a good description of the guy who had left with her. One lead meant only one game plan, hang out and see if she walked in through the door. The guy with her might just turn up again—she'd be back herself if all she was doing was hiding from her old man. Maybe, Jinks had no choice. His chances were slim and he had rent to pay. He'd stick with Megahotel. Their neuron regrowth might be flaky but they were the best he could afford, at least until the Shaunessey job paid off. Jinks shrugged. He'd better get on. He put his hand in the slot and watched as the machinery explored it, re-affirmed the identity it had just put into his body, and siphoned the cast from his allowance. The alarm cut out.

It was an effort to crawl from the cubicle into the world, rebuilt muscles and bone creaking protest as he dressed in his issue overalls. Outside, Jinks swung his arms, tried to limber up. The weather of Dub's planet was putting on its usual nightly show. The ferocious sun had set, leaving behind a raw, electric feel to the air, lethal ions filling the night with a thrill that never paled. Water vapour had been sucked into the atmosphere by the searing heat of the AO monster which ruled the day. Now it felt the touch of darkness. It condensed and fell on the city in scorching torrents. Rain pounded from a dead sky onto the decaying plastic buildings, gathered in dark pools around his feet, chuckled in the collapsing storm drains. A burning wind rattled the shutters. It bit at his skin. Thunder ran in a long chain across the blackness, the clouds too thick for lightning to show. Jinks' gun nestled cold under his arm pit.

Every building was coming alive. Out from the day shelters where they had lain and regrown, the inhabitants of Night City stalked their realm, sniffed the wet air, smiled with perfect remake lips. Behind perfect remake faces their brains groaned with unremembered suffering. Tormented organs signalled their visceral memories to unresponsive hearts. The eyes of the undead searched the streets. They were looking for excitement. Looking for something—anything—to drown the cell-memory of confined days, to batter down their unconscious bone-recollection of being dead and dead and dead again, seeking some sensation which might encyst the echoes of mortality nagging just below their minds.

**T**he underage kids were dropping acid in Rosie's Bar when Jinks elbowed through the crowd towards the door marked private. A young girl, her face already disfigured by one of the corrosives, turned to watch him as he passed. She was high and flying. Her arms were swollen where the needles had been going in.

"Hey, big boy, want to push me around some?"

Her companion put his hands on her, his voice whining.

"Swee'Pea, honey, look at me. Don't I give you whatcha want? Here, try this." She squealed as smoking liquid hissed on her smooth white thigh and ate into the flesh.

"Wow, I felt that!"

Sonja D. was leaning against the doorway of the performers' room, watching idly as the girls changed.

"Hi there, big one. Better jokes tonight?"

"Funny's not what alternative comedy's about. You knew that when you hired me. It's meant to make you think, Sonja, not make you laugh."

"Making laugh is what your money's about, you big lunk. Understand? No joke, no pay. Like this." She flicked a butt at one of the dancers. It sparked on its namesake and the girl squeaked. Jinks looked down on Sonja. He was not pleased.

"OK. I'll put in lots of routine stuff."

The needle in his skull shifted and lightning flashed across his vision. The sleazy room, stained mirrors, half-naked girls, reeled and darkened. He shook his head and the pain went. Sonja grabbed him and she held him up a little longer than was needed.

"You OK?"

"Megahotel rebuild. I'll cope. Who I'm on with? If I'm gonna do slapstick I'll need a straight man."

"Suki Ka. You know her? Little girl with big..." Sonja gestured. "She's the act before yours, with Jake. Use Jake as well if you like. Looky here, Jinks, if you're really skint I'll sub you an advance..."

"No favours, Sonja. Pay me what I'm worth. Thanks anyway."

More straight. She wanted it more straight. Jinks felt himself gripped by the idea. His gun was heavy, warm and smooth and heavy against his skin. His trigger finger twitched. "OK. Tell Suke and Jake we'll go right in from their fadeout. You want funny, I'll give you funny. No alternative, just slapstick, OK?"

"That's what I'll pay your rent."

**W**hen he'd dressed in his full stage kit, leather, tattoos, spiked hair, he sat in front of the screen which monitored the audience. They were scattered around the smoky room, stacked three deep by the needles, lounging single or in pairs at the tables. The tail end of the evening crowd was there and the first of the midnight people were drifting in, hungry-eyed, bodies as yet unmarked. The girl who had tried to pick him up was still just about on her feet. Her companion was slumped beside her, throat burnt out. She moved her tongue pinkly across her teeth, briefly filling the gap where her cheek had been.

Jinks zoomed in on her eyes. They were glazed with pain and pleasure, pupils dilated as she stared vacantly at the couple writhing on stage. She was stroking her long blonde hair while she dialled at random from

the menu. The bar stuck another needle in her arm. He didn't need to check the picture the judge had given him.

"Gotcha, sweetheart" said Jinks softly. "You just stay right where you are and Daddy'll be along to pick up the pieces."

**H**e waited in the wings until he reckoned they were nearly finished, the last twenty bars of Bolero still to go. Jake was pounding flat out with Suki thrashing desperately beneath him. Hold it, hold it... Now, Jinks strode out onto the stage, feeling the sweat on his palms, the dryness in his throat. Stagefright.

The gun was in his hand. It bucked as the forty-five calibre slugs cascaded into a thousand flechettes. They tore into the two figures. Jake's head jerked up and his spine cracked open. Jinks saw terror and ecstasy on his contorted face. Every muscle in his body convulsed and he was gone. A total experience.

The audience cheered, began to laugh. The music ended. The only way to go, blown away on the glory stroke, thought Jinks. Suki's scream of fear seemed almost real, cutting off abruptly as he took aim. What an actress. If she only knew. He squeezed out a couple of shots that smashed her body into red ruin. Even the adults in the crowd were laughing now. From behind he heard Sonja's low tones.

"Attaboy Jinksy. They love you. Now give 'em hell."

He turned towards the audience, soaking up the cheers. He bowed ironically.

"It has come to my attention that some of you guys don't like alternative comedy. You like it straight. Slapstick. OK, so when Sonja tells me, I like to oblige. They want it straight, she says, so I say I'll give 'em straight. Sort of. Hence the start of my act." He leered, catching the quick rustle of attention. He had them now, hanging on every word.

"I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that when the curtain falls the meat wagons'll come in. Jake and Suke'll get a good day's rest on a slab, full rebuild courtesy of the club and tomorrow night they'll be back on stage, rebuilt, better than ever. The world-famous Jake shlong will be in action again, that's what you think." There was an ironic cheer from the dark. Jinks edged round so his randomly waving gun covered the bar. He could see the girl even against the spots.

"Let me tell you why I'm an alternative comedian, why I don't normally do this slapstick stuff. I want to be an act with class, an act that gets under your skin. Like a blast of the high UV you'd pick up on a midday street. But it's difficult to do. Everyone's so bored. If you want a big laugh on Dub all you do is stroll down the sidewalk. The sun'll rip you to bits so fast the meat wagons will have to catch you as you fall. After a joke like that where's the fun in a nightclub act?" He paced restlessly, the auto-spots following his tall bony figure.

"You'd feel nothing if I blew you away, you're junked to the eyes. OK, so there's pain, yours and other people's. That can be amusing. But we're all too used to pain. The sun sees to that, picks our bodies apart night by night, day by day. Besides, pain's not feeling, it's just pain. Fear though, that's different. We've forgotten about fear. Not..." He paused, dragging it out.

One or two of them looked as if they were catching on. "Not... real fear. Until now. Until me."

He pointed casually with his gun at the two bodies behind him. Already they were breaking down, liquefied flesh dripping from reefs and racks of crumbling bone. From the audience came a gasp, a frisson of horror made audible. Jinks waved up the house lights, cut the spots. He was in shadow. The atmosphere changed abruptly. Suddenly he was something to be feared, unknown, dangerous. The audience was in the light, exposed, vulnerable. They huddled down in their seats, trying unconsciously to make themselves into smaller targets. It was very quiet. Jinks grinned to himself.

"Earth people used to be afraid of the dark. Not here, not on Dub. We love the darkness here. Daylight kills. The night's our friend on Dub's planet. I'm gonna change that. Here. Now. Tonight. I'm gonna make you beg for a bit more light. You'll beg to see me, see what I'm doing." There was a sob, cut off, from a girl at the back. Jinks raised his gun. She caught the motion in the shadow and she moaned. In fear.

"It's examination time. Let's find out why Jake and Suke ain't going nowhere but the city tip in a bucket. You, the little guy with the blood on his collar. I've fixed it so they're not coming back. How'd I do that, little feller?"

"Disruptor. Disruptor bullets." The man's voice was very faint.

"Louder, so everyone can hear."

"Disruptor bullets." No-one moved. They were frozen, fascinated. For the first time in their interminable lives they were feeling something.

"Yo there. A genius. Disruptor bullets. Little crawling beasties that split their cells down to slime. So they're not dead. They're dead dead. All their cells poisoned in one cataclysmic come. No cell, no rebuild. Nothing for the resurrection machines to work on. No brain to dump the holo into. Dead forever. Goodbye Jake. Goodbye Suke." The girl at the bar titrated a little, nervously. Jinks smiled at her though she could not see, a nasty smile.

"It's the real crowd here tonight. I watched as you came in. You're the dudes. The sophisticates, the cool. You don't like alternative. You don't like nothin'. You're bored with everything, junk, jokes, love, pain. You're not satisfied if a comic dies on stage while you watch. You want a bit of real mayhem. You want funny. I show you... funny." He hefted the gun and its black perfection glittered as it emerged from the darkness. There was a hiss of indrawn breath. "Now for some audience participation."

The barrel centred lazily on the girl at the bar who stared at the great black hole, her eyes widening.

"No, no..." She was shaking her head, still trying to mouth the words when the soft metal slug ploughed into her. It broke into pieces and spread her guts across the mirrors. She fell like a tree. All hell let loose.

In ten seconds the bar was empty, the only sounds the buzz of the electro-booths and the drip drip of dead flesh. Jinks stepped out of the dark, a lopsided grin on his face.

"My name's Jinks Hammer," he said softly to the empty room, bowing a little left and right. "Thank you

and goodnight." He strolled across to the bloody heap that had once been a human being, gun hanging idly at his side. Spilled acid smoked gently on the floor. Outside he could hear the customers howling as they ran.

"OK, Jinksy, so you're real funny. Where's my customer? I need them in here shooting up, not hiding in the alley." Sonja came out from behind the bar with fire in her eyes.

"They'll be back. You watch, Sonja, you'll be the hottest place in town. Come to Rosie's for the real thing. The only bar in Night City that sells real fear."

"Maybe. If you're right you can stay. If not, you're fired." Sonja looked at the mess on her mirrors. "Why'd you pick on the girl?"

"That's Shaunessy's kid. He hired me to bring her back, dead or alive."

"Dead, not dead dead. He'll have your licence for this."

"Nar." Jinks shook his head. "Only had five disruptors, used them all on stage. She's just got a little lead poisoning. Be good as new in the evening."

"What about Suke and Jake?"

He shrugged. "Disruptors. I had to make a point. That's show biz."

While Sonja rang for garbage, Jinks turned the girl over with his foot. Pretty eyes, he thought. The first new customer was already arguing with the robot at the door. Sonja had jacked up the admission charge again: she might complain but she knew that he was going to make her a mint. A small queue was forming behind the gesticulating figure.

For the rest of the night the punters sat staring with frightened eyes as Jinks paced around the bar. It was very crowded. No-one spoke. The needles did a roaring trade.

Curfew bells were ringing when the last customer was turned out and even then the robots had to use a lot of muscle. Sonja came and sat down next to Jinks who was quickly leafing through the menu, trying to decide what to shoot up with. Rosie's Bar was generous to its performers and he needed something to help him face the Megahotel machines.

"I've got a spare slab out back, Jinks. You can bunk down there if you like. Full custom rebuild, no charge." She locked tired but friendly.

"OK. It's been a long night."

Shutters slammed down as the building detected the approach of day. The two sat still and silent for a while, trying to put off the moment when the doors of their resurrection cubicles opened to take them in. The air grew sharper and more painful to breathe.

Outside a hostile sun was rising, harsh green light in a grey dawn.

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**Julian Flood** is the author of "The Jade Pool" (Interzone 57) and has also succeeded in selling a couple of stories to the new British sf magazine *Far Point*. With his first pair of story-fees he has bought a 4" reflector telescope, and is now saving up for a leather jacket in order to look the part of a writer (he says). He lives in Suffolk.

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# Tube Corn

## Television Reviews by Wendy Bradley

**T**elevision is a splendid witness and a lousy advocate.

Now hang on a minute, isn't it supposed to be the other way round? Aren't we cool postmodernists supposed to discount automatically most of what we see presented on the screen as fact and yet at the same time revel in television's unique ability to dissect impossible arguments and reconstruct them in comprehensible sound-bites? You couldn't demonstrate that from Channel 4's attempt at *A Brief History of Time*: what had been billed as a programme which would explain the thesis turned out to be a programme which told you who developed the thesis and how: not so much a *Brief History of Time* as a *Brief History of Hawking*.

This might not necessarily have been a bad thing. One of the strengths of the British television system is the documentary, particularly the programme in which we see people discussing their experiences and we are able to give appropriate weight and worth to the testimony of different witnesses because we can also weigh up their appearance and surroundings and demeanour and assess their credibility against perhaps contradictory testimony from other witnesses.

However, interesting as the life-and-works stuff was, the show was not billed as the history of Hawking but of time, and to me it signally failed in its attempt to make us understand the thesis of the famously unread best-seller.

**C**onsider, for example, the destruction of black holes. Now I was trying very hard to grasp this. There was that whizzy computer graphic of a sort of disembodied funnel that was supposed to represent the black hole. There were the black and white spots going ping! whir! pop! and there was Hawking's synthesizer voice:

According to quantum mechanics, space is filled with virtual particles and anti-particles that are constantly materializing in pairs, separating, coming together again and annihilating each other.

Yes! This is good! OK, so I have a few questions like "in what sense 'virtual'" and "materializing from where," but I can see the pictorial representation of them doing it and I feel as if I'm following the argument.

In the presence of a block hole, one member of a pair of virtual particles may fall into the block hole, leaving the other member without a partner with which to annihilate.

Yes! I'm still there! I see it all! Ping, whirl, pop! I understand quantum mechanics!

The forsaken particle appears to be radiation emitted by the block hole. Wonderful!

and so block holes are not eternal. Wait a minute...

They evaporate away at an increasing rate I said wait a minute...

until they vanish in a gigantic explosion.

Now since I copied that down from the soundtrack I've been trying to wrap my brain around it without success: "the forsaken particle appears to be radiation emitted by the black hole, and so black holes are not eternal." No doubt there are several chapters of the book, a post-doctoral thesis and perhaps the odd Nobel Prize stuffed into that "and so" but as television it is sloppy because it doesn't make sense. I didn't, realistically, expect a television documentary to make me understand quantum mechanics but I did, at the very least, expect it to give me a mental map of the book so that I could, if my grey matter felt up to it, have a go at following the argument in print later. As it is, I feel I know a lot about Hawking's friends and relatives and the circumstances of his work, but I think I'm going to have to give in and buy the book after all.

Stephen Hawking's life functions as so seductive a metaphor for his work that it is, I suppose, hardly surprising that the programme's producers went for the easier option. But it is a shame. *A Brief History of Time* would be a uniquely useful television programme. A programme about Stephen Hawking will sell some more copies of the book but adds nothing new to the sum of human knowledge. It is tempting in any event to believe that the book *A Brief History of Time* is not celebrated for its content but for its celebrity: as with *The Sotnic Verses*, everyone owns a copy but few have managed to read it.

One final question: when is Hawking going to get himself an upgrade for that astonishing robot voice? After the



programme I found my mental picture of his voice pulled inexorably towards the words "move!" "obey!" Does he harbour a secret fantasy of Daleks?

**O**h yes, and on the subject of Daleks, you *Dr Who* completists will no doubt be rushing out to the video shops this month as BBC Enterprises are releasing *Shodo*, which they describe as "Douglas Adams' masterly adventure destined to bring the Doctor face to face with the evil Skagra." In other words this is the six-part that was never finished after filming was interrupted in the 1979 technicians' dispute and which has now been cobbled together with linking narration by Tom Baker into an "entirety." I haven't seen it so I can't comment any further than that but those of you who are going to buy it would buy it whatever I said anyway, n'est-ce pas?

And finally, what about *Torch*, the BBC1 children's fantasy serial filmed in Greece and Yugoslavia in that glorious light that makes everyone look as though they've been lightly basted in honey? What better excuse could there be for Judy Dench to romp around in a false moustache wearing Harrison Ford's leftover burnoose? One of those programmes that makes you envious of the fun it looks to have been to make. No, I haven't the faintest idea what it's about either.

(And before you write in to complain, I considered that feeble jest about the Dalek long and hard before making it and decided it would be the worst kind of patronage to give reverence to Hawking because he performs in a wheelchair via a synthesized voice. But write and complain anyway, if it makes you feel better. I'm always prepared to be proven wrong.)

(Wendy Bradley)

# In the Manner of Trees

## Stephen Baxter

The port of the Richard P. Feynman opened with a sigh, and the cool air of WhatAPlace wafted into Stoner's head. She walked down the ship's ramp and onto a belt of earth that had been scorched to a deep, black crispness by the Feynman's landing jets, and then further out to where the grass grew undisturbed.

Flowers curled around her boots. The sunlight, the breeze made her uniform feel stiff and formal.

Behind a bush there was a child: dirty, bald, naked, and with a swollen belly...

"Oh, drink in that sun."

Stoner, startled, turned. Dryden and Wald, her two crew-members, had followed her out of the ship, and now Dryden, the life scientist, short and plump, was turning her round face up to the sun. "Isn't that great, after months of canned air?"

Stoner turned back to the bush. The child had gone; Stoner blinked, seeking to retrieve the afterimage.

Wald, the expedition's physical sciences specialist, pulled his thatch of red hair away from his forehead. "You can feel the peacefulness seep into you. WhatAPlace...they named it well."

Stoner turned around slowly, appraising the area. The ship sat like a metal egg in a landscape shaped like an upturned hand; the "palm" was furrowed by clumps of bushes (no trees, she noticed), while rock formations a little further away, gleaming white in the pale sunlight, encircled the ship like curled fingers. Stoner was surrounded by a jumble of shapes and colours; there was a feeling of newness, of freshness, as if the land had only recently been assembled.

Wild flowers waved in the breeze.

Birds sang, almost in harmony.

Fluffy clouds scudded overhead.

Clouds, birds, flowers. Stoner hated planets like this; they were always the most dangerous kind. "Something's not right."

Wald sighed. "Like what, Captain?"

"I thought there was a child. Peeking out of that bush over there."

Dryden, hands on hips, studied her sceptically. "Come on, Captain; the WhatAPlace colony was lost five centuries ago, and we're the first ship to visit since. How could there be a child?"

Stoner closed her eyes and concentrated. "Definitely a human face," she said slowly. "Caucasian. Female, I guess, about five years old. No hair, no clothes, and with a swollen stomach – malnourished, perhaps."

Dryden snorted. "If this kid ever existed, how could she be malnourished? There's food in abundance." She pointed. "Those are multifruit bushes. From seed to fruit-bearing in a month. The region's covered in them."

Stoner, irritated, said frostily, "Are you implying I'm seeing things?"

Dryden's face bore its customary mocking frown. "Oh, come on, Stoner, lighten up."

Stoner swivelled a midwinter glare at her. "I'll lighten up when I have some answers."

"Answers to what?"

"Like what was it that scraped the first colony off the surface of this 'wonderful place.' Which is what we were sent to find out; remember?" She jabbed a finger at Dryden. "But for starters I'll settle for knowing why there are no trees. And why, if I was seeing things with that child, all the multi-bushes are stripped of fruit. Or hadn't you noticed that either?"

Dryden looked around, surprised.

"In the meantime," Stoner said, beckoning Wald, "we'll see if we can't find that kid. And we'll go armed at all times," she finished.

"For Christ's sake, Stoner," Dryden protested.

"At all times."

Wald, placid and accepting, slid to his feet.

They couldn't find the child. They found the site of the original colony, though.

The colony had been established in a clearing which covered ten acres. Lines in the ground, overgrown now, marked the sites of buildings. But the lines were crazed and broken; again Stoner had the odd impression that the landscape had been cracked apart, the pieces jumbled at random.

The colony's single ship, an old-fashioned GUT-drive intrasystem vessel, had been broken to pieces; creepers and clumps of flowers curled around slivers of hull-metal.

Stoner, standing amid the splayed-out corpse of the ship, shivered. "Whatever hit them, hit them hard and fast. They weren't given the chance to build again."

Wald wrapped his arms around his thin torso. "Well, that's one interpretation."

Stoner stared at him.

"Maybe they just...blended in."

"What are you talking about, Wald?"

"Captain, look around. This is a near-optimal world. Stable seasons. No native pathogens." Wald indicated the multibushes, the terrestrial grasses

which carpeted the colony site. "Earth vegetation has taken hold as vigorously as you could hope for. I think the settlers let their colony decay, and simply moved out into the landscape."

"And the smashed-open ship?" Stoner said coldly.

Wald shrugged. "I think the colonists did that themselves. Maybe they never wanted to leave. Maybe they were happy here. Captain, you're too ready to see disaster and threat in everything."

There was a rustling, a scampering of feet like a small animal's.

"You heard that?" Stoner hissed.

"Yes. I wonder if—Captain." Wald pointed. "Look."

At the edge of the colony clearing, about a hundred yards away, a small, brown figure plucked fruit from a bush, crammed it into a wide mouth.

Stoner held herself as still as she could, barely daring to breathe.

The child, bare, filthy, bald, forced fruit into her mouth, scarcely chewing before swallowing. Her legs seemed disproportionately long and slim, enabling her to reach right over the bush.

"Well, at least we know why the bushes are stripped bare," Wald whispered. "It's as if she's starving. And look. Her belly's swollen."

"Yes, but it doesn't make sense. Look at the fat around her legs, her backside. And isn't that belly a little low for malnutrition?"

Wald nodded. He said slowly, "She doesn't look more than five...but it's almost as if she's pregnant..."

The child straightened up, started like a deer. For a crystalline instant she looked directly at Stoner and Wald; her face was round, smooth and empty, her eyes the blue of the sky.

Then she turned and bounded away among the bushes.

"Come on; we have to catch her!" Stoner hurled herself across the metal-strewn meadow; she heard Wald panting close behind her. Within a few seconds Stoner reached the edge of clearing; the flat leaves of multi-bushes scraped at her uniformed legs, and the long, damp grass seemed to pluck at her feet, tiring her rapidly.

The little girl raced through a thicket, screaming like a bird; and from the thicket a shock of children burst and scattered. None looked older than five, but even the youngest scurried over the ground faster than Stoner could run.

The children swarmed over the landscape away from Stoner and Wald, disappearing from sight.

Stoner gave up. She stopped and bent over, resting her hands on her knees, and sucked in the spring-like air of WhatAPlace. Wald drew up beside her and flopped to the ground, strands of red hair plastered by sweat against his forehead.

"We've lost them," Wald said.

"Yeah." Stoner's heart was pumping, making it difficult to speak. "What did you make of them?"

Wald nodded. "Human. No doubt about that. Ordinary-looking children."

"Well, reasonably." Stoner straightened up and scowled. "All of a type, with those long legs and bald heads. All girls; did you notice that?"

"It was hard to tell."

"From toddlers up to five-year-olds, I'd say. And a lot of them with those strange, swollen tummies."

"Not all of them," Wald said.

"I think we've opened up more questions than we've answered. Like, where are the older girls? And the little boys?"

"...And the grown-ups," Wald murmured.

Stoner peered around the empty landscape, her eyes narrow. Somehow it looked different, from the new position they had reached. "Wald..."

"What is it?"

"That rock formation over there." She pointed.

"What about it?"

"...Is that in the same place as it was earlier?"

Wald snorted, an uncharacteristic noise that reminded Stoner of Dryden. "How could it have moved?"

"I don't know." Stoner bit her lip. "The light looks different."

Wald studied the outcropping of white rock indifferently for a few seconds, then turned his smooth face up to the sun and closed his eyes.

Stoner felt a surge of impatience. "You're supposed to be the geologist. Check it out," she snapped. "But first let's get back to the ship. We need to think of a way to catch those kids."

**F**or three WhatAPlace days they hunted the children over the grassy landscape, without success.

In the end, Dryden set a trap. The life scientist used the ship's galley to synthesize highly spiced foods, and had them scattered in little packets around a clear stretch of grass a quarter mile from the ship. There was melon laced with ginger and sugar, and mushrooms baked in garlic vinegar...Stoner couldn't help nibbling from the packets as she laid them around the clearing.

Before dawn the three of them lay down in clumps of grass surrounding the baited area. Stoner hefted an ultrasonic pistol – it was set to stun – and tried to ignore the food scents, the cool grassy dampness which seeped through the fabric of her uniform.

Just before dawn – at a moment when the sky shone brighter than the land – a girl looked around a bush.

Stoner held her breath.

The girl's head whipped this way and that, her eyes as bright as the sky, her mouth open. She was tall and slim. She crept forward on gazelle legs, leaving glowing prints in the dew. Now two more children, smaller, one with swollen and pendulous stomach, stole after the first.

The girls fell on the food packets, burying their faces in synthesized fruit; the soft liquid sounds of their feeding carried to Stoner.

She raised her pistol, sighted on the temple of the nearest child, and fired. The girl slumped forward, as if falling quietly asleep. The other children looked up briefly, their mouths smeared with spices from Earth. Then they too fell into the grass, their eyes sliding upwards.

**T**hey named the children, arbitrarily, Paula, Petra and Pamela. Paula was the first, tallest girl; Petra was the one with the swollen belly. They all seemed aged between four and five Earth years, and were superficially alike, with their long legs, low bald brows and wide blue eyes. But Stoner and the rest soon learned to tell them apart.

They confined the children to a cabin of the ship. They turned the walls transparent so that the girls would not feel imprisoned; but the strange environment clearly disturbed them, and they alternated between huddling together at the centre of their cabin, eyes moist and staring, and scampering around the floor, wailing and bouncing from the walls.

They were voraciously hungry.

While Dryden worked in her lab with skin and smear samples, Stoner and Wald brought the children food: basketfuls of multi-fruit, whatever the ship's galley could turn out. Stoner watched Pamela ram a synthetic peach into her mouth, whole; she could see it progress unchewed down the child's throat. It was like watching a snake feed. After a few hours there were bits of food, skins, pits and other debris – and urine and excrement – scattered like a carpet over the floor, and Stoner, despairing of keeping the children clean in any conventional sense, set up a regime of sluicing out the cage-cabin twice a day.

Stoner and Wald spent frustrating hours talking to the children, reading to them, showing them *Virtuals*. The girls enjoyed the *Virtuals*, as long as the flow of food to mouth wasn't interrupted; but as soon as the images disappeared the children would resume their restless wanderings around the cage.

The children never seemed to sleep.

After two days of this Stoner stood with Wald, wearily watching the girls through the clear cabin wall. Petra seemed in distress; she was lying in a foetal position, curled around a pile of fruit she was forcing into her mouth, and she stroked her distended belly in dismay. "Do you think she's hurt?" Stoner asked.

"Maybe. It's hard to tell. They're more like animals than people; they seem to respond instinctively, and then only to basic stimuli. Pain, hunger."

"But they're undoubtedly human."

"Oh, yes. But with inhuman appetites," Wald said. "They must eat their bodyweight in food every day."

"I guess that's right." Stoner studied Petra with concern. "Maybe some of our food has hurt her."

Wald shrugged. "It's more likely that she ran into a wall, isn't it? They don't seem to remember where the walls are, even after colliding with them a dozen times."

"No." Stoner ran a hand over the smooth outer surface of the cabin wall. "Remind me to reset the texture later, to something softer. And maybe I'll program in some kind of colour coding. I don't want them to feel they're in a cage, but I don't want them hurting themselves either." She touched Wald's shoulder. "Come on. I think they've enough food for a few minutes. Let's get some air."

Outside the Feynman the sun was dipping towards the horizon. The hollow in which the ship rested was a pool of darkening shadows, although the encircling fingers of rock still shone with sunlight. "So," said Stoner, "how's your hypothesis of a sylvan paradise coming along?"

Wald scuffed at the grass with the toe of his boot. "I don't understand the children," he admitted. "But I'm not convinced they're unhappy. Perhaps we should release them. Dryden is going to find out all she needs from the samples she's taken already."

Stoner frowned, squinting at the rocks. "Maybe," she said absently. "But we still haven't got close to

the big questions. Like, why haven't we found anybody over the age of five?... Wald, did you check out those rocks, as I asked you?"

Wald's face was impassive. "Sure."

"And what did you find?" Stoner snapped.

"I filed my report," Wald said. "Do you want me to recite it? What can I tell you? Those are plutonic formations – coarse igneous rocks, formed at great depths in the crust. Captain, rocks are rocks. The details are in the log."

"Look at that formation over there," said Stoner, frustrated. "The one shaped like an outstretched hand. Doesn't that look different to you?"

"How?"

Stoner stared at the formation, unsure. Weren't the shadows a little sharper, more severe? "Wald, have we got a log image of the area when we landed?"

"Sure."

"Will you check it out? I think –"

"Wald! Captain! I think you'd better get in here." Dryden's voice, from within the ship, was sharp but controlled.

Stoner turned and ran, her hand on the ultra pistol at her waist. "What is it? What's happened?"

They found Dryden inside the children's cabin, squatting amid food debris with tightly folded arms. The other two children, Pamela and Paula, scurried nervously around the walls, cramming fruit into their mouths; Petra, pale, shivering, sat close to Dryden. Surgical instruments lay scattered over a cleared area on the floor. There was blood on Dryden's bare forearms, her instruments; and blood was sprinkled over Petra's feet and calves.

Stoner stood in the doorway, staring. "What has hell's happened?"

Dryden looked up, her eyes wide and moist. She opened up her arms. A baby, pink, slim, shining with amniotic fluid, lay cradled there, kicking feebly. "It's Petra," Dryden said quietly. "She's given birth."

**T**he new child – they called her Patricia – grew fast. After a day she was crawling, after two days walking: unsteady as a foal, but already competing with the rest for fruit. Petra, the four-year-old mother, tried to feed the child fragments of food, but, though Dryden stemmed an initial haemorrhage, Petra weakened steadily. Soon she lay in a corner of the cabin, able to feed only on the food the crew-members brought to her.

Dryden emerged from the cabin and stood with the others, wiping her hands. "There's nothing I can do for her. It has to be something in the food we supplied. I'm restricting the others to multifruit from now on."

Stoner rubbed her temples. It was all happening too fast; there didn't seem time to think it through. "Parthenogenesis?"

Dryden shrugged. "That's what we saw. That's what my studies of them show, too. We thought they were girls. They're not; they're closer to hermaphrodites, with a full complement of human reproductive equipment contained in each little body. I estimate they'd be fertile about the age of two, and able to – ah, bud – twice a year thereafter, for as long as they live. Guess what." She faced them impassively. "Pamela and Paula are pregnant now, too."

"Now we know why they are so hungry all the

time," Wald said wonderingly, his face pressed to the clear wall of the cabin.

"Why, Dryden?" Stoner demanded.

"Why what?"

"Why did the original colonists build their kids this way? So they could breed like – what, like rats? What's the point?"

Dryden stared at the children, her round face drawn and empty; all her cynicism and sharpness, Stoner thought, seemed to have been knocked out of her by this experience. "I don't know. I still don't know enough about their biology. For instance, they've clearly adapted to the conditions here, in the hundreds of their generations since the abandonment of the colony. See the long legs, the baldness – the reduction in intelligence."

"Yeah." Stoner scowled. "But how can natural selection be occurring in a population of hermaphrodites?"

"Dryden," Wald's voice was deep, troubled. "Look at Petra." Something about the stillness of Petra, the awkward way she lay on the rubbish-strewn floor, told Stoner without room for doubt that the brief life had gone out of the child-woman. Stoner was surprised to find a morsel of grief in her heart.

"I'll see what I can do for her," Dryden said.

Stoner held Dryden's arm. "No. Look at the others. I think we should watch what happens."

The other girls, including the baby, had gathered around Petra's still form; even forsaking food they muzzled and snuffed at Petra, and pulled at the limp limbs. They were smiling, vacantly.

With a sudden, soundless explosion, Petra's body burst.

Stoner gasped and took an involuntary step back.

At first the skin blackened and splintered away, and then the deeper layers, the tissue, organs and bones. There was no blood, nothing to indicate that this shell had so recently been a human body. The three girls pulled at the fragmenting body, causing it to shatter faster, and soon it was as if they were playing in a mound of autumn leaves; the girls rubbed the blackened stuff over their skin and into their mouths and hair, laughing out loud.

It was the first time Stoner had heard laughter on WhatAPlace.

**S**toner sat with Wald at the foot of the ship's ramp. The sun, at its noon high, bathed Stoner's limbs with a warmth from which she shrank.

Grass lapped tranquilly about a fist-shaped swelling of rock directly ahead of her. The formation seemed close enough now for her to see every niche, every crevice. She stared suspiciously at it.

Dryden emerged from the ship, wiping her hands on a towel. She threw herself to the ground and turned her round face up to the warmth of the sky. "Well, at least we know how genetic material is passed on," she said.

Stoner wrapped her arms around her knees. "Through the disintegration?"

"You said they breed like rats," Dryden said.

"Maybe. But they die like bacteria. A bacterium, on death, bursts, releasing a cloud of DNA into the air. Others, of the same and related species, are able to absorb the genetic material directly. That's how the cells of the WhatAPlace children behave. And as a

consequence evolution, selection happen rapidly; there's a wide variety of genetic material available for new generations, just floating in the air. You know, it's not completely without parallel, in mythology. Once, warriors would drink the blood of slain heroes, hoping to absorb their strengths... And it's an efficient way to go about reproduction."

Stoner scowled. "Is it?"

"Sure. None of the messy, uncertain, limited business we have to put up with."

Wald rested his head against the hull. "In the manner of trees," he said dreamily.

Stoner's mind was following a lot of unpleasant tracks. And she couldn't take her eyes off the rocks. The grass was stirring around the base of the fist formation, now. She snapped, "What?"

"I don't think I'd like to live without sex," Wald said. "But someone, in the 19th century I think, once asked if it wouldn't be better if humans propagated in the manner of trees. Wouldn't there be less suffering?"

Stoner shook her head irritably. "Let's put together what we've got. The stranded colonists, before their final disappearance, turned their children into baby factories. Fertile at the age of two. No need for sex; tiny gestation periods; no nursing dependency. Dryden, why do bacteria need to breed so efficiently?"

"So that the species can survive in a desperately hostile environment," Dryden murmured. "An environment in which individuals have to breed fast. Before they are destroyed." She looked around, bemused, at the sunny face of WhatAPlace. "Is this a place where humans must breed like bacteria in order to survive?"

A shadow fell across Stoner's face, cast by the rock outcropping ahead of her. Could the sun be dipping already?...But it was only noon.

There was a tremor in the earth.

Stoner turned to Wald. "Rocks are rocks," she said bitterly. "What the hell was that, Wald?"

Wald was sitting up. "If it's any consolation, I think I've figured out why there are no trees," he said.

Stoner stared at the fist-shaped rock formation. The turf around its base was being torn, now, like ice parting before the prow of an icebreaker: the rock was cruising towards them, through the earth.

The fingers of rock around the ship were closing. The three humans stared at each other wildly, the pieces of the puzzle moving around in their heads.

"It must happen every couple of months," Wald said. "Something old and plutonic, something vast, emerges from the ground. The surface is torn to pieces. The bushes have time to reestablish, but the trees can't grow quickly enough..."

"Just like the kids don't have time to grow to adults before they have to breed... so the colonists, before they were crushed, turned them into bacteria." Stoner scrambled to her feet; the ground shook violently now, as if to throw them off. "I think we should get out of here."

**T**he ship lifted, gleaming in the sunlight like a jewel.

The sunlit half of the world was a storm of rock, churning water and shattered turf. Shadows a thousand feet long raced across the land. Everywhere humans swarmed, millions of them, screaming and dying and breeding.

# Quiddity Wars

## Barrington J. Bayley

**C**arrying the last eighty-three specimens of humanity still to survive, the ornately wrought fighting starcraft paused. Below, three ragged Tarat ships fled diving for the darkened planet that loomed, seeking the refuge of its dim forests.

The wreckage of four more Tarat vessels twirled and gleamed in the void visible through the lens-windows. Joyous chance had brought the lightly armed flotilla under the human starcraft's guns. To Shen, now leader of humankind, as he sat rigidly in his straight-backed chair, there was delirious pleasure even in so tiny a revenge. How unexpectedly donated by an otherwise hostile fortune!

Likewise, it seemed intolerable that the three flapping raft-like enemy boats should escape. Shen spoke.

"We go in pursuit."

"Commander," interrupted the duty engineer, a spare grim man standing in a gargoyle archway, who spoke in a weary voice. "The main motor has suffered battle damage. We have capability for only one more planetfall. Should we not make that fall elsewhere?"

Yes, it was sensible, thought Shen. They should look for a haven where they could raise children and try to salvage the race.

It was sensible.

But it was not realistic.

The madness in Shen's eyes, as he looked from one to another of those present on the bridge, was the wild pain of an intelligent species knowingly on the point of extinction. "There is no use in such a course. We cannot possibly survive. The universe has a new god. An enemy god."

Shen's wife Mirienne came to stand by his side. She spoke in high, clear tones. "That is so. The universe has turned against us."

Continued Shen, "We have lost the war for all time. It was fought and lost far away, yet there is nowhere for us to go. However distant our flight, the very metaphysic of existence will oppose us. Do we agree, then, to fight – and win – this last battle?"

On the bridge, starlight shone through the lens-windows and mingled with the subdued violet lighting of the interior to glimmer on burnished, baroque surfaces. Eyes glinted with hatred. Faces were raised. Mouths opened.

"YES!"

Shen voiced an order to the fighting mancarrier's organometal brain. The spaceship dipped towards the planet's murksome presence.

**T**he atmosphere whispered by, the organometal brain speaking of a region of turbulence which the Tarat boats had entered and which was throwing them about like leaves. The mancraft followed, the deck of the bridge heaving and lifting now that starflight mode was switched off and the inertial stability field no longer operated. Perpetual gloom cloaked the planet. The brown smoky clouds which boiled around the mancarrier extended all the way to the surface, concealing a world forest whose crowns reared as high as two kilometres. The Tarat boats had been expected to separate and flee in diverse directions – but no. They kept close, converging each time they were buffeted apart. Finally, not far from a vast flat cliff which soared like an edifice, they disappeared as one into the foliage.

Into that same forest crashed the mancarrier, entering slantwise into a cathedral-like night, shoving aside branches and giant ferns, briefly tilting like a bat to avoid titanic trunks. Then came the ambush. Fanlike flashes from ahead, three of them, one from the left, one directly in front, one from the right. Outlined in fire, the carrier lurched and struck a bale. Its guns spat bolts of lightning, but too late. The Tarat boats were gone, flitting down an invisible trail.

Injured, the carrier limped after them, groaning a scant few metres over the ground or dragging itself over damp moss, until, beneath a monstrous plant whose sword leaves curved high like aerial roadways in a fog, they found the Tarat craft parked together.

At the base of this vegetable, besides which men were like ants, lurked a single root into which an entrance had been cut.

The root was hollow.

Shen first went with the engineers to inspect the Tarat rafts. They were curious vehicles, enveloped in cloth-like sheets which aided their locomotion in some manner. Their simple box-like holds were empty. The craft had been abandoned.

They next examined the interior of the root. The dark brown surface of the tunnel it formed was of a woven appearance, and rough enough to give purchase to the foot. Deep into the alien earth the passage wound, curving beyond the reach of the searchlight they shone down it.

"This is where they have gone." Shen frowned. "But how did they know it was here?"

He shrugged. "It is enough. We will pursue."

Mirienne joined him, her pale face gazing past him

in the direction of the searchlight beam. "And husband, when we have run these enemies down, when we have destroyed them, what then?"

"Then? Why, nothing. Unless we manage to live here in this wetness and gloom. Nature will not help us."

"So, we die."

"So, we die."

"So, we die!"

The harsh echo came from Morendo, the ship's philosopher, who had emerged from the carrier. His was a role largely redundant now that the cosmos had changed. But men had not forsaken their priests, even though their god had died. His haggard face glared, and his eyes rolled.

"Most reticulated, most interwoven, are the events that have brought us here! Commander Shen! Do you not know this place?"

Shen muttered fretfully. "It is but one among a billion out-of-the-way worlds."

"It is the original home world of the Tarat!"

Shen's startled glance swept the darkness of the towering forest cover. "How can you be sure of that?"

"By the descriptions. By the characteristics. But above all, by the strong Tarat-sense I feel here."

"Should it not teem with the creatures?"

"That is their way. On rising to the godhead, they abandoned their home."

Morendo then began to speak the philosophical science of deities to explain the Tarat's indifference to their own past. Shen ignored the words, lost in his own thoughts. How much harder it must be for Morendo when he recognized the changing face of the godhead! To see, in the slow inexplicable way of cosmic processes, that no longer was mankind favoured. Once humanity had ruled a thousand worlds, and might have ruled ten thousand more. Then no scheme was too grandiose to plan or execute. All went well with man in those days. How could it be otherwise? In those days, the spirit of humankind had formed the god of the universe.

Even Shen, untrained in deities though he might be, could sense it sometimes. Everyone could. The world-spirit. It was like a face on the appearance of things, a quality, an expression, a tendency. Hard indeed to define, but present. Just as every living thing had its own nature, its own heccesity, the cosmos had one too. As was inevitable. For had not philosophy established that the world was conceptual at root and matter merely an outward form? And if the world was conceptual would it not have a key aspect?

It was not properly understood why that key aspect should change on occasion, or why it associated itself with one conscious species at a time. The cause was thought to be accidental. Conscious beings could perceive concepts. They were like magnets to the world-spirit, which automatically would blend its being with theirs. Any race so favoured would find the manifest universe partial to its activities. So, for thousands of years, had it been with men, sure of their superiority, of their special right to exist, of their unique relation with the cosmic scheme. Till gradually, over a period of time, men had become aware of a slowly developing change in the universal melody. Inexplicably, it evolved into something strange and hardly comprehensible. Misfortune struck from all directions.



Illustrations by Paul Munford

A sudden hostility in the workings of nature was felt, and everything became threatening.

The godhead had abandoned man. He was alone, struggling against all that existed. Struggling, above all, against a once little-regarded alien race. For the world aspect had shifted, and had coalesced with the spirit of the centipede-like Tarat. Their essential spirit now comprised the godhead. In the war of extinction which followed, world after world of human settlement had been destroyed. In the last days, the dwindling numbers of men had become pirates, roving, hiding, harrying, scavenging, seizing any opportunity to express their hatred and defiance of the Tarat realm – and therefore of refashioned nature herself.

It was now nearly over. With a wave of his hand Shen cut off the philosopher's stilted sequence of technical terms.

"Back to your place, Morendo. Be ready with your beamgun!"

**T**he carrier would make no more journeys without major repairs, and for that there was no equipment. Like a miniature iron fortress it stood on the moss, mist condensing dew-like on its flanks, its searchlights illuminating the glade. Shen set about organizing the expedition into the root. The carrier was stripped of everything useful that could be ported, and the race of mankind formed into a procession. Bearing what they could, men, women and children emerged from the vessel which had been their home, had brought them so far, through so much. First came the portable searchlights, smaller lamps being carried by those further back in the column. Then came ammunition boxes, food stores, gas fans, gas helmets for protection against gas fans deployed by the Tarat, oxygen globes, medical supplies, a tremor-range-finder, idols of the defeated god, and, of course, hand weapons of all kinds.

An oldster hugging the gene chest trudged past Shen. The powdered store of chromosomes the chest contained had once held out the hope of resuscitating the race one day. Shen smiled forlornly, patting the old man on the arm as he dutifully clung to the sacred trophy.

The motley column in order, marshalled and inspected, Shen stood in the root's entrance and addressed his troops.

"This inhuman universe has become an extension of the enemy's being. Therefore, recklessness in the affray is inevitable. Care little for survival! Fight, and defy! We will now proceed."

One by one, they filed into the root.

**T**he root-tunnel's angle of descent varied between twenty and forty degrees, and it was sometimes difficult to avoid slithering down the slope. After half an hour of progress by the light of the forward searchlight, the passage levelled out and widened into a chain of bulbous chambers.

The third such chamber was larger than its predecessors, being more like a long, narrow hall. Flowing into it, the column spread out, losing linear form, and came to a stop.

It was then that the Tarat struck once more.

A child was first to see the blue haze of the death gas. He shouted a warning. Gas fans whirred, striving

to push the deadly cloud back while from the other end of the chamber came a chopping sound as Tarat blowers sought to impel it on.

A cry of fury was raised. Man-warriors, women-warriors, child-warriors, rushed to battle, pulling on protective helmet-globes as they ran. Some, impulsively reaching the gas before their globes were sealed, fell to the floor, their bodies spasming uncontrollably as they died. The rest now faced a Tarat troupe which had entered the chamber to throw a hail of small darts.

But the Tarat had not reckoned on the humans' berserker rage. Beamguns spat. Battle cleavers rose and fell. Gas blowers were junked into silence, the advancing fans blowing away the lethal vapour, and soon Shen was able to regard the results of the mêlée while the dead and injured were visited by those who carried the medical boxes. Only a dozen or so Tarat had joined battle, and their small bodies littered the end of the hall, chopped into pieces by cleaver or speared by gunbeam, giving off a strong smell of formic acid.

One Tarat still lived and dashed about in panic, its dart-thrower discarded. There was no point in trying to question it. The Tarat, metre-long invertebrates fringed with countless legs, the first ten pairs of which doubled as manipulatory organs, were not as individual as humans, their nervous systems being not nearly as large. Only when together in groups, linked by short-range telepathy, did personality and high intelligence emerge. By itself the prisoner was little more than an animal, with only rudimentary reasoning powers.

Shen used his beamgun. The Tarat writhed and became still.

"Administer death-drops to all too injured to walk and fight," Shen ordered the medics. "No one can be carried."

Now sixty-six in number, mankind continued. There had been three boatloads of Tarat, more than were yet accounted for. Beyond the chambers the tunnel took a sharp bend, the root wall buckling and wrinkling. A dead Tarat lay round the curve. Excitedly the band pressed on, to meet an onslaught of darts and whirling killing lights that looped through the air, all launched from beyond reach of the searchlight beams. Seven more humans fell amid answering fire.

Then, silence.

"They are waiting for us to advance," someone observed.

"Commander, come and see!"

It was a boy, aged perhaps ten. He led Shen back along the tunnel. Where the root buckled at the bend there was a wavering crack, forming a rough circle perhaps a metre in diameter. A Tarat door, barely noticeable.

"This is why they left the body where they did," Shen murmured. "This is why they fired and then withdrew. They are trying to lure us past this spot. Is it to cut us off? Or is there something they don't want us to see?"

The door would not budge until beamguns dislodged it and it fell like a lid to the floor of the tunnel. Shen called for a lamp and peered through the circular opening. A hemispherical chamber, perhaps formed by a bud put out by the root, lay on the other side. Shen crawled through and stood up. The chamber

was empty except for a central object, or apparatus, which he failed to understand. It resembled a merry-go-round, with a vertical shaft and various shapes or devices suspended from an overhead ring. All of these were enigmatic. But from one side a short, fat tube projected like a gun barrel.

Shen set his lamp on the floor. From behind him came a shuffling sound.

Morendo had followed him into the chamber. The philosopher clambered to his feet, snagging himself in his ragged cloak. He stood with arms akimbo, breathing deeply as though sniffing the air, the curly grey hairs of his bare chest rising and falling. His eyes rolled towards the roof.

"Can you not feel it?"

True, Shen did feel something. A lift, a pressure, as if his body was being expanded. A sense of some invisible entity in the room. Perhaps it was a force field of some kind, or a drug in the air.

Morendo's expression was even more fierce than usual. "We are at a node. That is the presence you can feel."

"A node," Shen repeated. So this was where the Tarat communed with their god. A place where the world-spirit interacted with special intensity. Once humans had known such places, temples of self-worship of the human godhead. Now those nodes had all shifted, and the places they left behind were empty of the special power.

Shen blinked. He looked about him. "Could we not seize this place, and resume the godhead?"

The philosopher shook his head, downcast. "It is the world-spirit which chooses, not us."

"But what," he said, "is this we see?"

Carefully Morendo approached the apparatus in the centre of the chamber, examining it from all sides but keeping away from the jutting tube's line of sight. He touched one of the suspended shapes, giving it a push. The horizontal rig began to revolve, continuing freely of its own momentum and carrying the shapes with it. But the hanging objects passed mysteriously through the tubby barrel as though either it or they were phantasms.

"Can you say what it is?" Shen asked.

Morendo made no answer straight away. Instead, he edged towards the strange machine's barrel, and then, tensing himself as though for an ordeal, placed himself directly in front of it. A violent force seemed to strike him in the midriff, almost lifting him into the air so that he staggered back and teetered on his toes, before flinging himself aside.

His face was wilder than Shen had ever seen him. "Can they really have got so far? Our philosophers have dreamed of such a machine..." He turned to Shen. "This device is a projector for a hecceity beam."

**S**hen was silent, while Morendo hoarsely and unnecessarily began to discourse, fulfilling his role like an intellectual machine whose start button had been pressed. Shen did not need to be told about hecceity, the name given in antique times to the thisness and suchness of things, the third primary element alongside form and matter. Hecceity was the property of individuality, of uniqueness, in every single thing, from the world spirit down to an atom. Without hecceity — "thisness" — any two objects



would in effect be the same object, even when of different form and separated in space.

"At a node, heccity is particularly intense," Morendo informed in his exaggerated style of speech which now was even more pronounced. "The Tarat have found a way to focus and direct it. Had I not escaped the beam, the essence of my being would by now have been hurled to countless worlds, perhaps, even, taking my body with it."

"To countless worlds?" Shen queried.

"A heccity beam is not a physical thing; it is not restricted by distance or direction. Therefore it can be aimed at a million worlds simultaneously. Such is no doubt the case here."

"But what use would such a ray have?"

"The Tarat think to strengthen their being. They project intensified Tarat heccity to all the worlds they occupy. And to countless others besides, perhaps."

"Then no wonder they have defeated us so completely," Shen observed. "They have enhanced the effects of godhead by artificial means."

He paused thoughtfully. "Morendo, do you hear that commotion outside? Go and see what is happening?"

"I go, Commander."

Morendo went down on his hands and knees and crawled through the circular portal. Left alone, Shen's thoughts raced. Was this machine a chance for human survival? A plan came to his mind. He would masturbate into the heccity ray. The beam would whip away his spermatozoa to innumerable distant planets. If the ray's power to bestow was as great as Morendo believed it was, then during transit they would be transformed into full-grown adults. Thus he would propagate his seed.

No. It was insufficient. The starflung tribe of his progeny would all be haploid.

A shout from Morendo claimed his attention. He went to investigate, and was met by Mirienne, his wife, her face an image of woe and resigned despair.

"Husband, we cannot win even this last battle! The Tarat come in force! Reinforcements from deep underground!"

It was so. From down the tunnel a horde had appeared, flinging a barrage of weaponry at the dwindling human band, which in a state of disorder was answering with everything at hand.

The final carnage had begun. The keeper of the gene chest staggered weeping to his commander.

"The genes! Hide the genes!"

Then, loud and clear above the uproar, as darts and light-coils zipped past him, Shen voiced his last address.

"Our god is not dead! Mirienne, with me! The rest, block the entrance, defend it to the last!"

Snatching up the gene chest, taking Mirienne by the hand, he urged her ahead of him into the chamber and crawled in after. Inside, they rose to their feet. Reverently, he unfastened the clasp of the gene chest and lifted the hinged lid.

Within lay a gleaming white powder made up of tiny but visible grains. Each grain was a zygote, or fertilized ovum, in stored form. Dipping his hand, Shen let the powder slip sensuously through his fingers. Then he lifted out a handful, and hesitated

but briefly before tossing it experimentally into the invisible heccity ray.

The powder fell sparkling through the beam and disappeared.

"Fools!"

It was Morendo. He hauled himself into the chamber, his beamgun in his hand. He was bleeding copiously from his left side, and his face grey with pain. Shen turned to him.

"The ghost of our god still lingers, Morendo, and has led us here, to show us how to save the race."

"That cannot be!" Morendo's expression was agast even over his pain. This is no longer our universe!"

"What does that matter?"

"It means everything!" Morendo's eyes swivelled to the gene chest. "I see what you mean to do. But it must not happen. The universe grows ever more alien, ever more incomprehensible. Have you not realized the consequences of impressing human heccity on a Tarat world? How could you contemplate such a thing? Monstrosities and perversions will commemorate our past glories! You will create human-Tarat chimeras! Travesties unimaginable!"

"Our race will live. It will have adapted to a new universe."

"It must not be!" Morendo howled. "To perish is our proper destiny!"

He then made what could have been interpreted as a move towards Shen and a bid to seize the casket. But he drew back when his commander drew a beamgun from his belt.

He made no attempt to defend himself as Shen gun-beamed him.

Outside, the sounds of death grew deafening, the roars and screams of raging, dying mankind harrowing. After a while, all became quiet. The Tarat, when they crept into the chamber, discovered a peaceful tableau. Shen and Mirienne stood close together clasping hands. In the crook of her free arm Mirienne supported the gene chest, which she held tipped towards her husband. Shen was repeatedly dipping his free hand into the gene powder, casting handful after sparkling handful into the unseen beam, sowing the wild oats of humanity's future.

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**Barrington Bayley** last appeared here just three issues ago with a short piece called "Why Live? Dream!" An interview with him appeared in our issue 35. He lives in Shropshire.

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# Strange Notions

## Stan Nicholls talks to this year's Nebula Award-winner, Michael Swanwick

**M**ichael Swanwick is not kidding. "It sounds like a joke, but I spent ten years writing and never finished a single story." His response to the inevitable "Why?" is simply, "I couldn't find a way to."

Whatever it was that blocked him for the first decade of his life as a writer remains a mystery. "I'm not sure I'll ever know the reason. But one day I actually finished a story and it was as if something had snapped inside my head. I thought, 'Oh, that's how you do it.' Then things picked up rapidly."

Rapidly is certainly the way his reputation is building, even if his output has been fairly modest; which makes his being short-listed for the Nebula Award nine times since 1980 all the more impressive. This year, with his novel *Stotions of the Tide*, he finally won. And, as a reader, he came to the field late. "I've always been a voracious reader," he says, "and read everything including sf, but I didn't read Heinlein's juveniles, for example, until I was 24. I got heavily into sf about the time of the New Wave. It was people like Gene Wolfe, Le Guin and Moorcock — that entire parade of heroes they had back then — who brought me into science fiction."

He was born in 1950, in Schenectady, an enormous company town in New York state. "The company was General Electrics and my father was an engineer there. He was constantly bringing home brochures, charts of the space programme and samples from this and that. In fact our next door neighbour across the fence was one of the people who invented the artificial diamond. So I kind of grew up with the future, you know? There were always people wandering through with strange notions and weird lights in their eyes. I think that had a strong influence.

"So perhaps it's no surprise that I originally wanted to be a scientist. But I was sort of lured away from that by the beauty of literature, and also by the fact that in fiction everything works. When you set up an experiment, nine times out of ten it doesn't work when you run it, but if you write a science fiction story all you have to do is say, '...and so it worked.'

"What kicked off my writing was a weird thing. When I was eighteen I had



a job in the loading docks of a furniture factory for ten hours a day to get money for college. They had a conveyor belt an eighth of a mile long, with furniture being built at one end and me wrapping it for despatch at the other.

"There was a bit of a recession going on the summer I was there and they weren't turning out much furniture. I hadn't a lot to do, but I couldn't sit down and had to look busy. So I would wander around this enormous room picking up little scraps of paper. I fell into the habit of writing words on these pieces of paper, little phrases and so on, and by the end of the summer I was writing paragraphs. It was then I decided I was a writer. Ten years later, when I was 28, I finished a story. I sold it a year later.

"When I committed myself to writing I seriously trashed my life by very carefully not picking up any career skills. I came out of college with a degree in English Literature, but there was nothing I was really qualified to do. In retrospect I think I should have learnt something that would earn me some money."

**I**n 1974, shortly after leaving college, he moved to Philadelphia. "That winter I lost fifty pounds because I didn't have any money. I almost starved to death trying to be a writer. But it was very romantic in a way. I was living with some art students in a squalid little place across from a flophouse, and right next door to the Sahara Hotel, a pay-by-the-hour whorehouse. I would sit up in the middle of the night by the window writing and listening to the whores and pimps screaming at each other. Which is probably the ideal, romantic writer's life. Except for the fact that I didn't produce anything."

What he was trying to produce was science fiction. Presumably he chose the genre because of his interest in science? "Yeah, and also because, at the time, science fiction was exciting. There were lots of things going on and people were blazing new trails into the wilderness. Meanwhile, in mainstream literature, everything was very dull and staid. It was the beginning of all those novels about forty-year-old college professors having mid-life crises. Looking back, it's obvious that

was just the tail-end of modernism, which had sort of worn itself out. But it seemed if you wanted to write interesting and mentally involving work sf was the only option."

"At the time science fiction was exciting?" Why the past tense? "Well, right now sf does look a little unadventurous. But I think that's only the turn-of-the-decade phenomenon. If you look back at the end of the 70s and the end of the 60s, and probably the 50s for all I know, things looked pretty dull then too."

"When I entered the field in 1980 my friend Gardner Dozois was always talking about his peer group, the people he liked and respected, like George Martin, Joe Haldeman, Ed Bryant and so on. And they're a pretty impressive bunch of people. So I entered the field, looked around and said, 'Who are my compatriots?' And there were none; there was nobody doing anything very interesting. But two years later there were quite a lot of them, some of whom were indeed there when I entered, it's just that they weren't very visible. It seems when it suddenly hits you that sf is dull is just when things are about to pick up. I'm optimistic. I think the 90s will probably be a good, high-energy, creative period."

**S**wanwick intends being part of that, but on his own terms; which means writing the kind of books he believes in and letting commercial considerations take care of themselves. "I'm a very slow writer and writing commercial stuff is every bit as hard for me as writing my own stuff. I've tried writing hack material and it's just as slow, painful and difficult, so there's really no point to it."

"Right now I'm working on a fantasy novel, which I can't talk about. I'm one of those people who can't talk about work in progress. But the basic idea for it seems, to me anyway, very exciting and different. So it will be a fantasy novel that does not look like anything you've seen before."

"When I come up with a strong idea I do a lot of thinking about it. I figure out pretty much where to start, then at some point I work out the ending. When I've got some place to begin I just aim the entire book toward that ending. So in *Stations of the Tide*, for example, I didn't start writing it until I had the image at the end, of the bureaucrat falling into the sea and changing into an aquatic animal. Which was lifted from a Brian Aldiss story, incidentally!"

"In between there's a lot of discovery as things fall together, and my task is to create a larger pattern that makes sense. But basically I aim at the end, which is a good method, because most science fiction, when it fails, falls down at the end. That's where writers

try to tie things up too fast or put on an ending that doesn't really fit the novel. So it's been a productive method for me."

His approach is straightforward. "I just sit there and force myself to write. I had writer's block once for nine months, but I wrote myself through that one. However, it's only fair to say there was a lot going on in my life at that time, including losing my job and getting married. While I was on unemployment I sat and typed for eight hours a day. I would write, but it never became... fiction, even."

"But the drudgery aspect gets me into it. I sit down and start writing. Well, actually I sit down and start re-writing where I was last time; I start a few pages back. There are two moving edges when I'm writing - as far as I've got, and as far as I'm pleased with, which can be three pages back or twenty pages back. That will get me going, and after a while I start on new stuff."

"I'm really painfully slow. I do dozens of drafts. I write it over and over and over again until it's down right. If there's one word on a page I don't like I re-type that page. If there's a phrase ten pages ago that's wrong I'll go back and re-type it before working my way up to the moving front of the story."

The pacing of a novel is particularly important to him. *Vacuum Flowers*, for example, moves at a fair clip despite the incidental denseness of information he is conveying. "That's a major consideration, and especially necessary for books like *Vacuum Flowers* and *Stations of the Tide*, I think. In *Vacuum Flowers* in particular I wanted to have everything moving very fast, so I decided that in addition to the overall plot, the central thrust of the book, that at any given time the main character would have some immediate goal, something she was trying to do or to reach. I employed that technique very consciously."

"In one place there's somebody attempting to kill her and she's trying to get away from that person. In another place the police are coming through the ghetto and she has to escape from them. No matter where you were in the novel there was always a short-term goal uppermost in the heroine's mind. I figured that would help to push the reader along. They might lose sight of what was going on in the novel on a larger front, but they would always know exactly what was going on right here, and where they were in relation to it."

**R**esearch also adds to the length of the creative process. "In science fiction you need to go out and do the research. If you're going to have a story about mining asteroids, you have to read books about asteroids to find out how large they are and get some idea

what kind of gravity they would generate, that kind of thing. You have to actually go out and get photographs of the surface of Mars and read the accounts of people who have been in space. You need to do that if you want to be at all convincing."

"On the other hand there are writers like Jack Dann, who write deeply from their personal experience. In a sense all their best stuff will be autobiography transmogrified into art. Their fiction comes from things that have happened to them and which they're working out. I can't do that. There are things that have happened in my life I really want to write about but I haven't yet found a way to do it. I need to have more distance so I can look at them objectively."

"When I wrote '*Ginungagap*' [a Nebula Award finalist in 1980] I started that story five, six, seven times and couldn't get into it. Finally I took the main character, a young man, and changed him to a woman. That gave me the distance I needed to write the story, because when it was a male character I was identifying too strongly. And everything was sourceless - why was this character doing what he was doing? Where did he come from? Well, basically he came from Schenectady - he was me at age twelve, you know? But when I changed it to a woman I found I didn't identify with her as strongly, and saw her in terms of all the other women I knew. All the women I've known at all well have always had reasons for whatever they did, so casting the character as a female I was able to come up with plausible reasons for everything she did. The point is that if I don't believe in it I can't finish it."

"I try working in a very realistic form. At the same time I want to incorporate bizarre strangenesses that everybody knows cannot possibly happen. In this respect I really favour Howard Waldrop's stuff, but I can't write like that, or have not yet been able to write like that, because I can't really believe in it. I can only write well what I believe in. If I'm writing a story and one of the characters is not speaking in a way I think they should I'll stop the story entirely until I get that character's voice back."

Swanwick has been called a cyberpunk. He doesn't resent the label but thinks it wrong. "I've never been a cyberpunk. Bruce Sterling made up the official list once and I was specifically excluded from it. But that was just agit-prop on his part, and very successful agit-prop too."

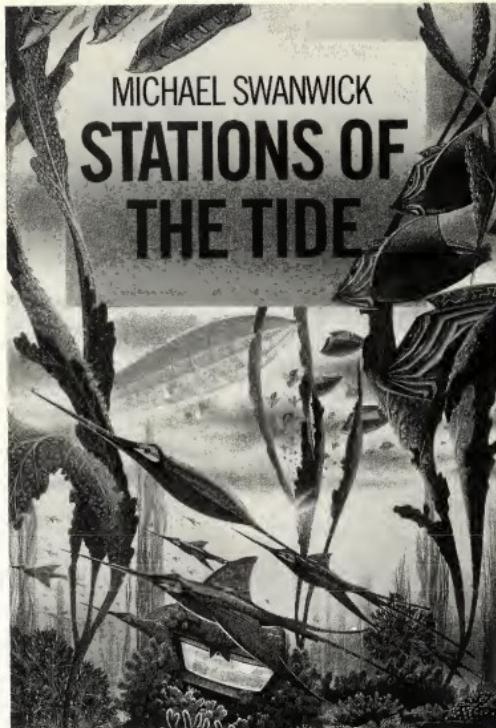
"As a matter of fact I deliberately threw in hidden references to cyberpunks in *Vacuum Flowers* I thought nobody would ever get. At one end of the novel I had a woman named Snow in an empty room filled with machinery you couldn't see, and I had a flic-

kering neon sign outside a place called The Cutting Edge, which was a switchblade flashing from red and back again. That was my nod to the cyberpunks.

"At the other end of the novel, separated by a great deal of wordage so the two wouldn't get together and implode, was a character who waxed enthusiastic about Matthew Arnold. What was funny about that was I told this to Jim Kelly, who is one of the quintessential Humanists. His eyes lit up and he got very excited because he loves Matthew Arnold. He said he thought Arnold was a terrific writer, and the first person to realize the future wasn't going to be pleasant and friendly, that it was all going to be cyberpunk. But on that basis you wouldn't call Matthew Arnold a cyberpunk."

Talking of Matthew Arnold, what about the other category Swanwick has had laid on him – a representative of the Humanist strain of sf? "I guess that's a little nearer the reality, but frankly I don't fit that description well either. To really be a Humanist writer you have to throw in literary references a little heavier than I do. You want to know how I think of myself? I think of myself as an old fashioned science-fiction writer."

Michael Swanwick is published in the UK by Century/Legend.



## Garry Kilworth interviewed by Gwyneth Jones

Continued from page 28

toed Men, due out from Grafton. And from Hippo Books *The Third Dragon*, a young adults' novel set in Hong Kong but dealing with the recent student uprising in China. I don't at the moment envisage myself writing any standard sf novels, but I shall continue to write sf short stories until I fall over the keyboard clawing at my cardiac cage.

(This interview appears, in a slightly different form, in *Strange Plasma* no. 5, ed Steve Paschnek, Edgewood Press, PO Box 264, Cambridge, MA 02238, USA)

## Notes on Our Authors

**Brian Aldiss** (see his story beginning on page 17) last appeared in Interzone with "A Life of Matter and Death" (number 38, a special Aldiss issue). Over the past 40 years he has been a distinguished and prolific writer in many forms, his sf novels ranging from *Non-Stop* (1958) to *Dracula Unbound* (1991), and his non-fiction from *Cities and Stones* (1965), a travel book about Yugoslavia, to *Bury My Heart at W.H. Smith's* (1990), an account of his writing life. He lives in Oxford.

**Stephen Baxter** ("In the Manner of Trees," page 36) has been a steady contributor of stories to Interzone since his first sale, "The Xeelee Flower," way back in our issue 19. His second novel, *Timelike Infinity*, is just out in the UK from HarperCollins, and his first, *Raft*, was shortlisted for the 1991 Arthur C. Clarke Award. He lives in Buckinghamshire.

# Why Is Science Fiction?

Chris Gilmore

Grahame Greene divided his books between "novels" and "entertainments," and literary critics have amused themselves over the distinction ever since. The implication that the entertainments were less to be taken seriously than the novels is inescapable, so the question arises, was Greene always right in his assignments? Is it possible for the author to be wrong in such matters? Or was the whole business nothing but a mischievous joke on Greene's part?

The analogous question, "What is science fiction as distinct from mainstream literature?" has been masticated, if not to death then to terminal boredom, continuously for the last 40 years at least. I propose therefore to beg it; for the purpose of what follows, science fiction is that which is published as such (except when the publisher has got it wrong) plus that which is not published but universally recognized as such (usually when the writer or his/her publisher is snobbish about the label).

That such snobbery exists is significant, for 'twas not ever thus. By analogy with Greene's joke (or whatever), the work of "serious" writers who also produce science fiction is retrospectively divided between the sf and the "serious" matter. This has been demoralizing to the writers and damaging to literature as a whole, two major casualties being H.G. Wells and Kurt Vonnegut.

It was Wells's blessing to write at a time when science fiction as a genre had not been invented. Should a reputable and fashionable novelist, meeting another in their club, enquire after his current work in progress, the reply, "I've just started a scientific romance/satire set in the distant future/allegory based on projections of the latest technical advances," would be socially unexceptionable. Because of the current perception of sf as a genre form, that is no longer the case. Some sort of schizophrenic special pleading would be necessary, on the lines of, "Of course, it's not conventional science fiction [perish the thought], but I'm using some of the conventions and vocabulary because I found that's the only way I could express what I feel I must say."

Genre writers, of course, have nothing to say, they just churn it out.

As applied retrospectively to Wells, the effect has been ludicrously one-sided. Wells was a man of extraordinary influence, being among the founding fathers of Fabian socialism when socialism was largely untried and looked as if it could well be the wave of the future. Nonetheless, he foresaw the deleterious effect which even efficient centralized planning must have on individual genius, and wrote about it in *The First Men in the Moon* (1901).

He also had personal knowledge of the evils of mercantile industrialism, and foresaw more clearly than anyone else the dehumanizing effect which prolonged and intimate association with machines could have on the human spirit. He wrote about this most powerfully in *The Time Machine* (1895) and his novella, "A Story of the Days to Come" (1897). Of these, *The Time Machine* is generally regarded as a slight piece, the novella goes unread, and *The First Men in the Moon*, while acknowledged to be good (and even set at 'O' level), is not regarded by teachers of Eng Lit as at all equal to such socially significant works as *The History of Mr Polly* (1910) and *Kipps* (1905). As for *The Holy Terror* (1939), in which Wells used the licence of science fiction to probe the psychology of an English analogue of Hitler and to speculate on the course and consequences of the coming war — who has even heard of it, let alone opened it?

At least Wells was dead by the time it happened. In Vonnegut's case the snobbery of the literary establishment found a flaw in his own character, and through it corrupted him.

Vonnegut first came to prominence with *Poyer Piono* (1952), an anti-Utopia of exceptional quality in which he predicted that the effect of automation would be to usher in not the Age of Leisure, as had been optimistically predicted, but the Age of Unemployment, eeked out with makework. As he says, though poverty may be an inconvenience it has no ruinous effects on the soul; but the sense of personal uselessness destroys utterly.

*Poyer Piono* is clearly science fiction, and belongs to the strong tradition which began with *Brove New World* (1932) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and was to continue with David Karp's *One* (1953), Laurence

Sanders's *The Tomorrow File* (1975) and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). All these books, be it noted, were written by authors who had already made their reputations in the mainstream (and in Sanders's case, in crime writing as well), but Vonnegut had no track record; he was labelled as a science-fiction writer ob initio.

He carried on writing, both science fiction and mainstream novels. *The Sirens of Titon* (1959) is sf, though of the spoof variety; so is *Cot's Crodle* (1963), an end-of-the-world story. *Mother Night* (1961) and *God Bless You, Mr Rosewater* (1965), studies of differing forms of corruption, are clearly nothing of the kind (though this last features an sf-writing hack called Kilgore Trout, author of innumerable ill-written paperbacks including one called *Venus on the Half-shell*, in reference to Botticelli's painting, *The Birth of Venus*). All have their wit, all express aspects of Vonnegut's moral philosophy (which is based on the notion that it's worth making the effort to value people for their human qualities, even when they present a repulsive or irritating exterior, and/or aren't very bright), all are somewhat flawed by Vonnegut's ill-controlled whimsy, all are well worth reading.

Then Vonnegut suffered a singular misfortune. He wrote a perfectly rotten book, and it was his first bestseller. *Slaughterhouse Five* (1969) takes as its central symbol the bombing of Dresden, at which Vonnegut was present. With his mixed background as a very young German-American soldier, taken prisoner by the Nazis during the Battle of the Bulge, he was doubtless even more profoundly affected by it than other witnesses. As one who had written neutralist pamphlets before the United States entered the war, he may have felt a certain guilt when the fact of the Holocaust came out. It is therefore not surprising that he accepted uncritically David Irving's account of the bombing — here was something to throw in the other pan.

But whatever interpretation you subscribe to, the bombing was a most serious matter. Vonnegut chose to combine it with his rankest whimsy to date. The viewpoint character, Billy Pilgrim, is a young man who has suffered some of Vonnegut's own wartime

experiences, but has "come unstuck in time," so that he knows, through having experienced it in episodes of "mind travel," how the rest of his life will proceed. This seems at first to be presented straight, but an aspect of the future that he experiences is being kidnapped by aliens, mated with a voluptuous starlet and kept with her in a vivarium on the planet Tralfamadore.

Such an hallucination looks like the compensatory wish-fulfilment dream of a man who has married a dull and unattractive woman for her money, and could work well enough as the main subject of a psychological novel, but set alongside the appalling crime (or appalling tragedy) of Dresden the effect is excruciatingly vulgar. His whimsical insertion of the phrase "So it goes" whenever anyone's death is referred to does nothing to rescue the novel, which is irretrievably cheap at every level.

Hey ho. No one ever went bust underestimating the public taste. *Slaughterhouse Five* sold well into six figures, and was made into an appropriately dire film. Vonnegut used the cachet of his bestsellerdom to renounce his origins, proclaiming that he was a writer of straight novels, and had nothing to do with sf. For this desertion the sf community punished him in two entirely appropriate ways. Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, in their religious fantasy *Inferno* (1975; based closely on Dante), placed him in a red-hot coffin decorated with a list of his titles and awards and the one-line epitaph, "So it goes." Philip José Farmer went to the effort of actually writing *Venus on the Half-shell*, which he published under the pseudonym of Kilgore Trout in 1975, to Vonnegut's great discomfiture. Farmer had pastiched his early style extremely well, so that many critics assumed it was Vonnegut's own work, and hailed it as a welcome return to form.

For Fate has punished Vonnegut far more severely than the sf community ever could or would have done. Nothing which he has written since *Slaughterhouse Five* has been a patch on anything he wrote before, be it science fiction (*Slapstick*, *Galapagos*) or straight (*Jailbird*, *Breakfast of Campions*). He reached his nadir in a collection of essays entitled *Palm Sunday*, of which it's kindest to say that he awards himself and his family the palm for just about everything (including pre-war neutralism), and let it go at that.

One can easily make too much of one writer's decline or the misfortunes of another's reputation, but both are symptomatic of what I maintain is the entirely bogus divorce between science fiction and mainstream literature. To Huxley and Orwell it was perfectly natural to set their novels in the future,

and they made no more apology than had Kipling ("As Easy as ABC"), Poe ("Melonta Tauta") or Hans Andersen ("A Thousand Years Hence"). I emphasize that all these stories are what would now be called "hard" sf, written in terms of what the authors believed to be credible technical developments. Kipling's is shamelessly didactic and the other two are satirical, but none can be dismissed as fantasy.

So what went wrong, and does it matter? There are still a few respected mainstream writers who carry on writing sf on the side, the most prominent being Anthony Burgess, but nothing like enough; the most recent to join their number is Iain Banks, though it's questionable whether such an archetypal enfant terrible can be described as respected – yet. Like old age, it will doubtless creep up on him. Meanwhile, Brian Aldiss and J.G. Ballard have acquired mainstream credibility without feeling the need to tear up their roots, but when you consider the amount of good writing being done, two is a very small number.

The danger is not to the mainstream writers, who are professionals, nor to the science-fiction writers, though they could do with a wider audience; it's the general reader who suffers, through being largely cut off from the novel of ideas, especially ideas about "where do we go from here?"

As the fantasy and sf columnist of *Topical Books* I do what little I can to redress the balance by criticizing sf in terms of literary quality, construction and subtext, just as I would mainstream novels. In the short time I have been doing it, I have covered a serious and alarming consideration of how mankind might modify itself; a speculation about how technological change and social upheaval can reinforce each other; a religious novel about the mission of the Church in times of catastrophe; a suggestion that the evils of the Kenyan experience could easily be repeated on a planetary scale in the future; a fable about the interaction of human and machine intelligence; and a speculation about what might happen if the Chinese Confucian spirit should suddenly embrace high technology as the Japanese Buddhist spirit has.

These are momentous matters by any standards, but who has the time and background to read technical texts about them all? Who has even the inclination? Yet their treatment in novels of ideas makes them accessible. Most novels of ideas are science fiction, and all but one of those I have cited were the work of science-fiction writers per se, not mainstream writers slumming for once. The one exception is not primarily a novelist at all.

In elevating the novel of ideas, I don't wish to denigrate the novel of

sensibility, the novel of manners or any other genre. But I maintain that while the novel of ideas languishes in a ghetto which is certainly not of its choosing, the entire corpus of literature will be subtly out of balance, and this profits no one.

(Chris Gilmore)

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# Mothmusic

**O**bservations of Astar Taziel (personal physician to the House of Memizhon) on the symptoms of boskh-addiction.

#### Boskh:

The Aelahim Moonmoth was indigenous to the remote Island of Ael Lahi until this year when a spice merchant brought back live specimens, claiming that the dust from their wings is used extensively by the islanders both as a hallucinogen and a medicinal remedy. This merchant made extensive claims as to its healing properties which the Arkhan commanded me to investigate. The results of my findings are recorded below.

#### Medicinal Uses:

When administered in minuscule quantities, boskh has proved to be most efficacious in curing mortal fevers and aiding the healing of infected, gangrenous wounds. A miraculous substance without any like in all Ar-Khendy. One to five grains is usually enough and in the case of a large area of suppurating tissue, a light dusting – no more.

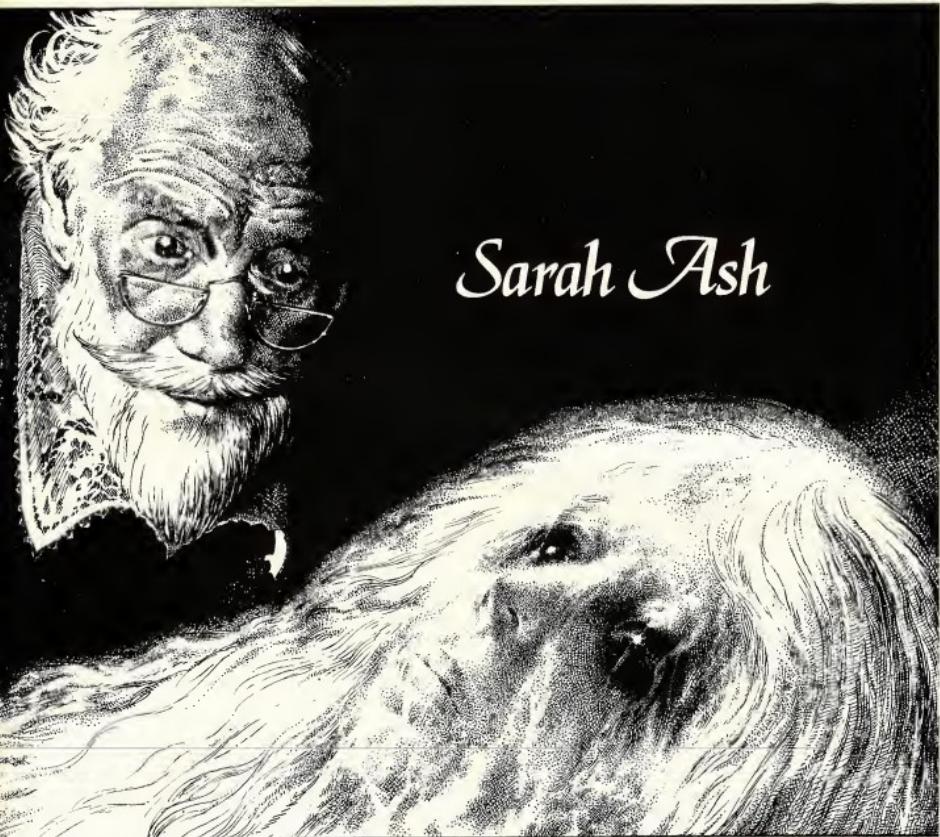
#### Addiction – warning signs:

Repeated use of boskh creates dependency. Visual disturbances are the first signs – sore, watering eyes, intolerance of light, etc. When I tried boskh for myself, the sense-enhancement was – magical; quite beyond my wildest imaginings. But as the drug wore off I experienced nausea, agonizing stomach cramps, aching eyes – and the oddest intuition that if I were to take more boskh, the symptoms would be instantly relieved. However, I held firm to my resolve and recovered within a day's span.

#### Journal of the Plague Year

Called at dawn to the house of Torella Sarille, favoured mistress of X—. There found all the household in darkness and disorder, Sarille herself, her hair down, half-dressed, wandering the upper corridors like one distracted. When I had calmed her with an infusion of powdered horn-poppy, I examined her. I have never seen anything like this before. Her eyes appear to be swelling within their sockets; the pupil has grown so large that there is little iris still visible.

# Sarah Ash



The pain caused by the swelling – and by any light – is so excruciating that the patient screams aloud.

When asked, Sarillè admitted to ingesting boskh in large quantities. Now I learn that at Myn-Dhiel all the courtiers have been taking boskh – by mouth and by incising the veins and sprinkling the powder into the bloodstream. Apparently it leads to a greatly enhanced sexual prowess and stamina. They call this "Yskhyssé," a word in the Old Tongue that defies accurate translation. She described several erotic practices to me which made even this old physician blush; I will not record them here but mention only that the boskh appears to facilitate some kind of hallucinatory mind-merging and that these exquisites at Myn-Dhiel have devised some bizarre concepts of using the various bodily orifices in ways that the All-Seeing certainly did not intend!

Called again to Sarillè. All shutters closed, no lights. Sarillè supine upon her bed, the brocade curtains drawn. Blind. Crazed. Crying out for more boskh. And everywhere, in the moonlit garden, in the streets, the shrill fluting of these creatures and the

sweet stench from their iridescent wings. When I left the house, the night air was filled with moths, swirling like snow. Girls played weird flutes to them, sang, to entice them into their chambers.

Sarillè. I have never seen the like before. This... corruption of the skin. Puncture marks on her arms and legs; I thought at first they were scars from gross intravenous boskh-abuse but they look more like the bite of some insect or leech.

More cases to attend to. Three courtesans of the House of Red Khassia, a house of ill-repute much frequented by young bloods from the Palace. And the boy Khal, the paramour of the Tarrakan, a Tarkymn of some seventeen years, famed for his great personal beauty, a uniquely exquisite blending of white-fair hair with soft black eyes, deep enough to drown a man – But I digress. Those famed dark eyes have lost their lustre and become filmed and dull. Khal is going blind – yet he screams with pain if anyone approaches with a lantern or candle. The Tarrakan is beside himself with grief. He has offered me gold by the bushel if I can but find a cure for the lad.

When I arrived at the Tarkhas House at dusk, the air was filled with the beat of the moths' soft wings, their lirruping songs. The very air – glittered. I tied a scarf over my mouth and nostrils so that I should not inhale the noxious substance. In Khal's room, the windows were wide open and a flock of the creatures fluttered about the room. The boy lay motionless on the bed – they were crawling all over him, a heaving coverlet of white down. I went to drive them off but the Tarrakan stopped me. "Look," he said, "their presence has calmed him – surely this proves the healing properties of this boskhdust!"

Outside in the courtyard dead moths fluttered to the cobbles like dead leaves. Soon a carpet of pale husks covered the ground.

"They are dying!" cried the Tarrakan, grabbing my arm. "They are dropping by the thousand – there will be no boskh left to cure Khal. Can't you do something?"

"But we have seen this before...in the common selkh moth on which our livelihood depends. The moths mate, lay their eggs – and die."

"But – where do they lay their eggs, Taziell?"

I turned back to Khal. The creatures were slowly crawling off him, their wings ragged, all glitter dulled. I brushed some away and they dropped sluggishly to the floor, unable to fly. My fingers were smeared with dust from their decaying, disintegrating wings. Khal groaned, muttered incoherently. I bent over him in the dwindling dusk, trying to examine him; it was too dark to see clearly.

"Bring light!"

"He cannot bear the light –"

"I must have light!" There was something in the urgency of my voice that made him obey. As he held the lantern over the boy's slim body, he saw what I had glimpsed in the gloom. Puncture marks. Bruised puncture marks, freshly darkstained with blood, marring Khal's perfect skin, on chest, smooth belly and groin – as if he had been stung by a swarm of envenomed bees.

"Dear God. Dear God." The light flickered as the lantern rattled in the Tarrakan's shaking hand. He sank to his knees, laying his head on the boy's breast. "He still breathes – have they drained his blood, are they leechmoths, are they –?"

"No."

"Then – what?"

"I do not know. I have never seen anything like this before..."

"Taziell! I'm paying you to cure him!" Tears streamed down his cheeks. "Don't let him die!"

**I** have watched by Khal's bedside for three days and nights now. There are so many similar cases in Perysse that I cannot number them. If I had not seen the moths crawling on the boy's body I would have said from the marks that we were in the grip of some terrible Pestilence. But Khal's torment lies within – and is struggling to get out.

Sarillé is dead. She took poison; the Sleep of White Crystal that kills swiftly. I examined her body. Dear God. She was dead but they still lived. To see them wriggling beneath the skin, to see the undulation within dead tissue, maggots already gone to work in a corpse not yet cold –

The Tarrakan is losing his sight; his damaged eyes weep scalding tears. He will not leave Khal's side though the boy's mind wanders on far dark shores and he recognizes no-one, not even his lover.

They burned Sarillé's body today, although I entreated the authorities to let me cut the corpse open – if only to prove my theory that –

Today I am certain I saw them again. The wriggling tracks beneath the skin. One beneath the left breast, another across the midriff, a third above the groin, a fourth in the thigh. Khal is being eaten away – from within. I pray the Tarrakan loses his sight before he sees this living corruption in the ruins of his lover's body.

The nights are silent not but for the wailing and screaming of those wretches who are infected. The moths have died by the thousand, their dry, dessicated corpses litter the streets and gardens. Yet still the craving for boskh drives the addicts to extraordinary practices: court ladies on their knees in their fine selkhs, scrabbling through the piles of street dirt, searching for a newly-dead moth with a taste of dust left on its wings; respected scholars gathering handfuls of the frail fragments to burn just to inhale a whiff of the dust; shrunken-faced addicts actually licking the brittle shells, crunching the furred bodies, avidly swallowing them down like sweetmeats –

They hatched today.

They burrowed their way to the surface and as dusk fell, they slowly oozed their way out of the yellowed pustules of corruption that have erupted all over Khal's body. His screams –

It is as I feared. It is just as I feared. They are parasites, these moth grubs, parasites that feed on live human tissue. Now I have proof. Sletheris, the grubs of these moths, emerge at about a thumb's length, yellowish-pale and glutinous, like an oozing jelly; fattened on their host's flesh and body fluids, they then weave a cocoon about themselves which they attach by a thin silk thread to their host...

I have been to the Arkhan. With my proof positive. He has sent his Tarkhasters throughout all the Seven Cantons to destroy the moths. But it is too late. All Perysse is infected. And there seems no way to kill the grubs – without killing the Host.

May Sain Mithiel protect us. We are doomed.

When I returned from the Arkhan to Khal's room, he –

Even now, I can hardly write it. Khal dead. The Tarrakan dying. He had slain the boy and then, in the manner of Iskhandar, thrust the razhir-blade into his own entrails, twisting it...an unspeakably painful death, the room reeked of spilt blood.

He had dragged himself to the bed where the boy's body lay and was trying to reach up to touch his hand. As I entered, he called to me.

"Taziell...I could not bear to watch him suffer so – it was the – only way. See – that we – are consumed on the same pyre –"

**W**hen will this end? We have not enough wood or pyre-oil to burn all the bodies. Most, on learning what crawls within them, take their own lives. The looms are silent, the bazaars

and quais are empty. Every household burns fumigating herbs; the city is choked with the bitter fug and the billowing smoke of funeral pyres hangs in a pall above Perysse both day and night.

Weary, I am so very weary now. There seems to be no way that I, who call myself a physician, can do anything to alleviate the suffering. I truly believed this substance – boskh – to be a miracle, a cure for all the diseases we thought incurable.

Now all I can do is stand helplessly by as my patients die, one by one.

My esteemed colleague, Merindyn (who was apprentices with me to crabbed old Maistre Dyrnion) has sent for me. He has discovered a new case in the stews of the Seventh Circle, a girl prostitute known as "Mynah" (I am told she was gifted with a shrill whistle and a good ear for vulgarly popular melodies). This poor creature, abandoned by her pimp, must have lain some two weeks in her garret whilst the sletheris went about their work inside her.

"Have you ever seen anything like this before, Taziel?"

In truth, I had become so used to horrors in the last weeks that I thought I could not be shocked by anything new. This is the most advanced case I have seen. The girl's body lay encased within a web of soft, sticky selkh... most like a selkh cocoon and yet she still breathed within. From what I could make out beneath the glutinous threads, her eyes seemed open and unusually prominent and dark... she was Changing.

"Tell no-one," whispered Merindyn, "for they will destroy her if they discover her."

He related then that the good citizens of Perysse had burned three such... mutations in the courtyard of the Tarkhas Zhudiciar, calling them abominations of Ar-Zhoto. And I cautioned him to look to his own safety... the mood of the people is such that they will burn him as well as his patient if they find him at her bedside.

Drawn back at night against my will to Mynah's bedside. Scientific curiosity – or morbid fascination? I cannot stop thinking about that pale, emaciated body still breathing within its protective cocoon. What exactly are we witnessing here? When she wakes – if she wakes – what will emerge from this soft-spun chrysalis?

She lies there naked but for the woven shroud of gossamer threads, oblivious of my presence, oblivious of this rheumy-eyed, weary old man with his wavering lanthorn and his laboriously scratching pencil. I have ensured the shutters are closed, no chink of light must give me – and her – away. (Strange. I cannot glimpse any trace of sletheri tracks on the white skin. I had thought – but now I wonder if I am wrong.)

No voluptuous whore, this Mynah, just a scrap of a girl, scarce past puberty. Tender breasts, pink-tipped, wildrose buds that bloom amidst tangled briars on waste grounds –

But I digress. It must be understood that my descriptions of the patient's physical condition are merely set down for medical reasons.

Fine drifts of long hair, so fair it seems white beneath the threads. I thought Merindyn had said she was dark, glossy-haired like the mynah bird's plumage... But then these whoregirls will dye their hair

rainbow colours, tattoo their bodies, anything to attract the customers (so I am told.) If only her eyes were not open. I feel she is watching me. And yet – how could that be? Her pulse, her breathing, everything has slowed – she sleeps the deep sleep of the narcoleptic, of the comatose.

I wonder if she dreams...?

Moon glimmerlights the dust-drifted boards, the bare pallet... Moonmotes float, glittering, in the darkness. Glitter of sound, each radiant point of light a line of high, pure crystalline sound, spinning, weaving –

Each gossamer threadline of sound encasing her vibrates, lulling her with a shifting texture of thin starglitter; starmusic, sphemerusic –

Mothmusic –

Dreaming. I must have nodded off a moment there. Not one night's uninterrupted sleep since this cursed plague began but I used to be able to weather such hardships; I must be getting old. Yet still an echo of that reverberant threadhum in my ears, high, unearthly –

Wax. Undoubtedly a build-up of earwax. I must remove it or I may go deaf; some gently-warmed olive oil should do the trick.

I had not intended to return. But, called to a child with the quinsy in nearby Naseberry Lane, I could not resist the lure and crept up the cobwebbed stair in the dark to her garret to see if she still lived.

She had shifted a little within the protective threads. Moonlight glistened on her paleskin hair, her soft white body. Even as I leant over her, I caught the breath of a sigh, so faint it was but the beat of a moth's wing.

I am certain sure now that she is not Hosting sletheris, that the smooth skin is unmarked because there is no infestation beneath. What I have been observing is some unique process of change – of metamorphosis – of translation into Something Else. I can only conclude that the ingestion of boskh stimulates – or triggers – this state of irreparable Change in certain susceptible individuals.

If only she would wake. There is so much to be learned from her, so much she could tell. And yet I dare not disturb her; they say that wakening a sleep-walker only results in madness; dementia.

Away just before dawn with a heavy heart. How long now until she is discovered? How long?

I cannot stop thinking about her. Mynah. As I go about the silent streets from household to household to administer what little treatment I can offer to my dying patients, I see her pale face, I hear again that strange, high music, I cannot wait for night to fall so that I can slip back to her garret.

So tired today. Two dead in Spindle Lane; three new cases of blindness confirmed; one whole household found dead in Shuttle Alley, it seems the master had gone mad and killed them all, even his little babe in the cradle. Is there no end to it? If only there were some way to –

"Ta – zi – el..."

She is calling to me, her translucent body naked except for the drifting skeins of her whitesoft hair. She leans from the casement, calling to me and as she

calls the moonlit night glitters with the fall of petals from the black sky. And the aching sweetness of her voice makes me want to weep with its promise of release.

"Let go... drift away..."

I woke to find I had fallen asleep, my head on my open journal, the quill pen leaving a dark smeared blot over my last entry... The ink was wet, blurred with water.

Saltwater.

"Once you find yourself weeping," Maistre Dyrnion used to say, "then you know it is time to retire. Cultivate the art of detachment, Taziel. Detachment is an essential skill for a physician."

I should have retired last year, left the city, gone to end my days in the quiet of the countryside. Now there is no escape. Even if I can offer no hope of cure, someone has to comfort the dying, someone has to close the sightless eyes, to pull the sheet over the still, set faces of the dead...

Moonlight powders the dusty threads of her transparent shroud. Soft curves of her white-fleshed body beneath, breasts whose delicate nipples are round and pink as little shells. So long since I touched a woman – in that way. O, a physician may touch a hundred women in the course of his work, from tender maids to cradled crones – but all for information's sake, not for his own pleasure –

She stirs.

Can she hear my thoughts, can she sense the heat of my desires? She is so weirdly beautiful, lying there swathed in the white filaments of her hair. From the diseased body of this drab little prostitute, a new creature is emerging, white, virginal – inviolate.

Should I waken her? Slit the dusty webs, take her in my arms, feel that soft, naked skin, that whitepeach bloom against my cheek?

Stay a moment, Astar Taziel. The boskh has infected your brain, stimulating obscene desires, unnatural lusts with its insidious musksweet fragrance. It had to happen... I have been inhaling the stuff for weeks now. But to have so nearly transgressed the ethics of my profession, to have so nearly –

I must never come here again. This must be my last visit.

"Farewell, Mynah," I whisper, my hand straying out to touch the sticky threads, pulling back at the last moment. Is it just my heated imagination – or does she murmur softly as the shadow of my hand falls across her face?

**A** struggle of hooded Hierophants was approaching, mumbling chants and burning bitter herbs in their clanking thuribles. In their wake followed the Believers. The fanatics. The zealots.

The greylight was bright with their spluttering torches, the air harsh with their monotonous chanting.

"The fires! The fires! Come to the fires!"

"Well if it isn't Doctor Taziel," a sharp voice said, a splinter piercing my ear.

Farindel. Clerke to the Haute Zhudiciar. Skilled in the ways of inquisition.

"You're out late, Taziel."

"So many patients to attend to." I waved my hands a little too animatedly, hoping my journal with its sketches and notes was safe concealed within my robes. The heat from his torch was making me sweat; must he hold it so close to my face?

"I am told there's one of them sequestered hereabouts," he said, "and the Arkhan's word is that they must be destroyed. Fire." He smiled at me, showing teeth stained from chewing amise root. "They cannot resist it. Moths are drawn to the flames –"

A hoarse shout from down the lane. I closed my eyes, praying. Not Mynah.

The Hierophants had made a circle with their torches. I turned to go but Farindel grabbed me by the arm; remarkable strength in his grip for one who makes his living pushing a feather quill over parchment.

"Watch." Again that slow smile.

And in the confusion of jostling figures, the waving torches, the jeering shouts and cries, I saw a pale figure at an upper window, a whitewraith, a phantasm, more moth than human.

For a moment, the creature seemed to hang, to float in the very air above the flames. I could not avert my eyes. Illusion. It must be illusion –

The fires caught light. That gossamer whiteness crackled, burned, the creature came thudding to the ground and the Hierophants closed in, hacking, stamping, crushing –

The stench of charred flesh was overpowering. I tried to pull away but Farindel had my arm clutched tight within his grip, his eyes glittered fanatically in the pyrelight.

"As physician it is your duty to bring such cases to my notice, is that understood? It would be counted a heinous crime to harbour one of these daemonspawn, Taziel. They must be eradicated. For their own good as well as for the safety of the people."

You are in danger, my beloved. They want to destroy you.

They do not understand.

How can I protect you from the firemobs that roam the streets by night, seeking to draw you and your kind to their flames? Farindel suspects me, I am sure of that. He may have set a watch on my house. As I go about my visits, I think I am shadowed: a glimpse of a watcher slipping out of sight as I turn to look behind me; a flash of movement caught on the edge of the eye's seeing...

And I can think of nothing but you, Mynah. Even your name stirs an echo of that crystalline music. Let me hear it one more time, let me hear your voice again, more potent than boskh, more achingly sweet, with its promise of healing.

Of release.

**T**he pull was too strong. I could not help myself. I had to go back. I had to see her. Somehow I knew it would be tonight.

The music was no more than an echo in my memory at first. Then it became more insistent, an iridescent melody that would not leave me be, wreathing round and around my brain.

And as I drew near the shoddy alleyway, as I crept over the refuse-strewn gutters, the music grew stronger,

more piercing — more alluring. I stopped in the dark beneath her tenement house and listened. A single moonshaft lit the ragged tiles of the roof, the high open casement with its cracked panes.

From that open casement the music issued, a single, unbroken thread of silverspun sound, liquid as moonlight.

It ravished the soul to hear it.

Now I knew. She had awakened. She was singing.

In the far shadows of the moonlit garret a frail figure, tall and slender, stood watching me, its dark eyes huge and sad. Clothed only in its long drifts of floating hair, white as spun sugar, it lifted one hand to me, whether in welcome or denial, I could not be sure. The long fingers were webbed, the tracery of veins in the transparent skin as delicate as a skeletal leaf, hoar-dusted by winter frosts.

"Mynah?" I said. My voice was unsteady, hoarse with a vivid, unexpected emotion. "I mean you no harm. I — I am a friend. A physician. I have watched over you whilst you slept. I — I—" My words trickled away to nothing. I just stared.

And the thing that had been Mynah stared mutely back at me.

"You cannot stay here," I said all in a rush. "If they find you they will burn you. You must come with me. Look. I can conceal you in my cloak."

For a moment I thought my Mynah had lost all powers of understanding. But then — O miracle — she slowly nodded her head. And I ventured closer, untangling my old worsted cloak and hesitantly offering to wrap it about her frail shoulders. She allowed me to do this — and as I did so, my hand brushed against her bare skin. Such a texture — softer than velvet but with the pile, the bloom of a moth's wing. And with that touch, a faint echo of that lost vision, that still, starlit darkness, that promise of...

Down the creaking stairs, I led her, flinching at each squeak of the rotten boards.

"Wait." I peered out into the dark-lit street; it was empty. A fitful wind was blowing; a rusty shutter banged. If I could hurry her to my home unobserved, there I could conceal her, care for her, observe her, learn all the secrets of her metamorphosis —

"It's clear."

She hung back, shaking her pale head.

"I can see no-one there. Trust me."

But she was so weak, her limbs so wasted that she could hardly put one foot in front of the other; she sank against me, a featherweight, her fragile frame weighed down by my cloak.

And as I struggled — vainly — to support her, I felt her tense in my arms. Looking up, I saw the splash of fire against the buildings.

Torches.

They stood at the end of the street, barring our escape. As I frantically spun around, I saw them closing in on us from behind. We were trapped.

"Why, Doctor Taziel, I see you have served me well."

Farindel. Coming straight towards us, a pitch torch in his hands, weeping gouts of flame onto the wet cobblestones.

"Served you!" I cried although my voice shook. "What makes you think —"

Mynah whimpered, cowering in my arms, trying



to hide her face from the brightness of the flames.

"Don't listen to him," I whispered to her urgently. "This is none of my doing. They must have followed me —"

"And what have we here?" He stood over us. The others formed a ring. I could hear the muttered chants, could smell the acrid smoke of burning incense herbs.

"A patient of mine," I said defiantly. "Will you let us pass? She is very weak and must lie down."

"Don't play games with me, Astar," he said, his voice hard-honed as my surgeon's scalpel. "We know what she is. And you know what the penalty is for harbouring one such as she."

He made a sudden slash towards her with his torch; Mynah let out a shrill, keening cry, the cry of an animal meshed in a snare. The cry pierced me like a knife. And the muttered chants began to grow louder, more insistent.

"To the flames, to the flames, to the flames with her —"

Farindel stooped and pulled at Mynah's hood; her white head was exposed to the torchglare, her huge insectile eyes which I had tried to shield from the firelight.

"Stop!" I cried as she flinched away. "Don't torment her!"

"A perfect specimen," he said, smiling. I knew what it meant, that slow smile. I had seen it before. All the while the chanting was rising louder, dinning into my ears with its merciless, mindless monotony. And now Mynah was struggling against me, struggling as the flames burned brighter and her dark eyes reflected their eerie glare.

"You can't hold her back, Astar," Farindel said softly. "She can't resist the flames. She is drawn to them."

"Don't look, Mynah," I implored her. "Hide your eyes."

"Mynah," Farindel echoed, still so softly, so seductively, "come to the fire, Mynah."

And then she broke free. I went sprawling onto the cobbles — as they closed in on her, trampling me, pushing me down into the mud as I tried to stop them, frantically tearing at their cloaks, their coats —

I heard their triumphant shout as the flames caught.

And her cry. I heard her cry. Ecstatic as the bright ring of flames engulfed her — then wordless, mindless agony as her silkspun hair became a tracery of fire, as the fire shot heavenwards in an explosion of star-sparks and the frail creature that had been made of moonshine burned like a moth in a candleflame — until something charred, blackened, dropped lifeless to the damp cobbles.

I think I went crazy then. I charged in amongst them, hitting, kicking, screaming all the curses I could call down upon their heads.

**T**hey took me away. And locked me in this cell. Soon they will return to question me. I must set this record down — for even if I do not leave this cell alive, someone else may read this, my journal, and understand.

My Lord Arkhan,

You must stop this massacre of innocents.

We have misunderstood the nature of these mutations. Driven by fear, we have mercilessly crushed them at their most vulnerable when, just emerged

from their cocoons, they are limp and weak. We have looked on their Otherness and seen it as a token of divine displeasure. Now I know we are wrong. Horribly wrong.

Boskh heals — when taken in tiny doses. And those who are Changed by boskh are Healers. They heal by touch — by the touch of sound upon the mind and body, this extraordinary shimmering, piercing web of sound that they weave. If you could but hear it, my lord...

That irresistible sound. It haunts me. Why do I have this feeling — that if I could only hear it again, all would be well?

(They are coming. I can hear their footsteps echoing in the passageway.)

If you could but hear it, you would understand. And so I beg you to end the slaughter. Else those unearthly voices will be stilled. And we shall remain locked in our brutish ignorance, not knowing that we have —

Here end the writings of Doctor Astar Taziel. As you can see, my lord Arkhan, Maistre Taziel never completed his Journals. Hints of the physician's rapid mental disintegration are to be found as the work progresses. The balance of his mind became so disturbed that he ended by defending the very mutations he had earlier sought to destroy. His paranoia became so severe that he believed us, the enforcers of justice and mercy, to be his enemies! It was disturbing to have to witness the rapid disintegration of a once-distinguished intellect. Astar Taziel is at present deeply sedated in the Asylum where I give you every assurance, my lord, he will end his days under constant surveillance.

— Farindel, Clerke

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**Sarah Ash**, who makes her Interzone debut above, had her first story in *Far Point* issue 4. She also has an unpublished fantasy novel doing the rounds, and another is nearing completion. She trained as a musician and is now "trying to convince young people that making music is fun — yes, I'll come clean, I'm a teacher." She lives in Beckenham, Kent.

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**Back issues of Interzone — all available except numbers 1, 5, 7, 22 and 23 — may be ordered at £2.50 each (£2.80 overseas) from the address shown on page 3.**

# Ansible Link

## David Langford

**A**s every sf reader should know, the word "ansible" was coined in the 1960s by Ursula Le Guin as the name of an instantaneous communicator with infinite range. This useful term was later pinched by other writers, in particular Orson Scott Card, who possibly failed to recognize it as an anagram of "lesbian." I stole it myself as the title of my nasty little newsletter (*floatat* 1979-1987, hideously exhumed 1991).

Now, all-wise editor David Pringle wants to disseminate the more comprehensible of Ansible's newsy snippets to a wider audience than just a few low fans in pubs. Lawsuit threats to him, please; vile gossip may be sent c/o 94 London Road, Reading, Berkshire, RG1 5AU.

### They Walked Like Men

Iain Banks has recently been Down Under at the Adelaide Writers' Week ... where he caused a certain concern with his official speech. This began with the explanation that he'd intended to smuggle in a machete and use it to cut off the impious Prime Ministerial hand that had dared to rest upon Her Majesty the Queen. Local sf fans later reported Mr Banks as "ideologically sound."

Orson Scott Card received this year's Skylark Award, presented in vague memory of Doc Smith to writers who are liked by the New England SF Association. The trophy itself is topped with a lens: former winner Jane Yolen made the announcement and explained why – ever since a tragic conjunction of the Skylark, the sun and her best coat – the award is traditionally accompanied by a gift smoke-alarm. Batteries included.

Lionel Fonthorpe, Britain's most legendarily prolific sf author and wielder of prose rhythms to make the eyes water ("He slept the sleep of the tired, he slept the sleep of the weary, he slept the sleep of the exhausted, for he was tired, and weary and exhausted"), received an unprecedented front-page splash in Publishers Weekly for his and his wife Patricia's *Secrets of Rennes-le-Château* (Samuel Weiser, spring list). This is a revamp of their invisibly published 1982 book on the subject. I can hardly wait: "The link between Rennes-le-Château and Visigothic churches, Cathar castles, Templar fortresses, Roman gold mines, Mary

Magdalen, Lazarus, Joseph of Arimathea, the Holy Grail, the Habsburgs, and even with the Money Pit on Oak Island in Nova Scotia, are all given strange credibility by the authors and researchers, Lionel and Patricia Fanthorpe [sic]."<sup>1</sup> Umberto Eco was not available for comment.

Colin Greenland has been unwell ("post-viral fatigue syndrome") but was mildly cheered to collect yet another prize for his space opera *Toke Duck Plenty* – this being the "Eastercon award," whose voters are exhorted to ignore all that stuff about literary merit and opt for what they furtively enjoyed. Now Colin pleads: "There are plenty of other books out there, some of which haven't got any owards at all – so I think you should start voting for some of them now."

Robert Holdstock has been eagerly telling everyone who would listen about a certain slight discrepancy between the rampant, papricid wooden image described in his latest novel *The Fetch (Orbit)* and its tastefully eroded depiction on the cover. "It should look like THIS," he cried gleefully, with appropriate and expressive gestures.

Garry Kilworth explains to me that his 19th-century children's ghost story *The Drowners* is full of measurements in metres and litres not by his choice but at the insistence of the publishers, Methuen. "They said kids wouldn't understand." At once I had a fantasy of a typical Methuen copyeditor's report: "The term *half a guinea* should be altered to 53p for clarity. References to playing halma and diabolo will not be understood – please substitute Nintendo throughout."

David Wingrove's Proustian (well, according to Brian Aldiss, anyway) mega-series *Chung Kuo* had a new kind of publicity at Britain's national Easter SF Convention in Blackpool. Everyone who registered received a free fortune cookie, containing a slip with the legend "Chung Kuo – the epic. The Reading Experience Of A Lifetime Awaits You." We draw a veil over the obscene and sadistic scenes of fortune-cookie hurling which ensued when a box of several hundred spares was tossed into a convention party.

Gene Wolfe has a new "double volume" coming from Tor in the USA. Subtle combinations of the two books' titles led to the happy thought that the package should be called *Gene Wolfe's Book of Otters*; eventually they settled for the stodgier *The Castle of Days*.

### Infinitely Improbable

The Encyclopaedia of SF teetered on the brink of oblivion in the wake of Maxwell's financial horrors...but with Macdonald bought by American publishers Little, Brown, the new edition looks back on course for 1993 publication. High sighs of relief were heard from dedicated encyclopaedists John Clute, Peter Nicholls, Brian Stableford and (copyediting) Paul Barnett, as their invoices began once again to be paid. Now there's talk of a companion Encyclopaedia of Fantasy, often discussed but always, so far, abortively...

The British SF Association Award for best novel went to Dan Simmons's *The Fall of Hyperion*, and for short story to Molly Brown's "Bad Timing" (IZ 54). When it came to the artwork award, your editor wore a distinctly happy look since everything on the shortlist was an Interzone cover: in the event, Mark Harrison was the winner (IZ 48). As usual, nobody from the movie industry was interested in accepting crumby little sf awards – for, in this case, *Terminator 2*.

Conventions. Ought I to be announcing conventions here? The list becomes fearfully long and boring. The next two British Easter events are the 1993 "Helicon" in Jersey (information from 63 Drake Road, Chessington, Surrey), with guests John Brunner and George R.R. Martin, and the 1994 "Sou'Wester" in Bristol (3 West Shrubbery, Redland, Bristol, BS6 6SZ), with guests Diane Duane, Neil Gaiman, Barbara Hambly and Peter Morwood.

Bye-Bye SFWA. After long acrimony about all the presence of all those wet fantasy authors in the organization always called the Science Fiction Writers of America (was it Gregory Benford who said that fantasy is a cancer on the body of sf?), it suddenly became SFFWA – Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

Ten Years Ago. Consumed by gut-wrenching fits of nostalgia, I keep looking back through my old files to discover such 1982 memorabilia as Kingsley Amis's umpteenth definitive statement (in the Radio Times, no less) that science fiction is completely dead...or my slightly embarrassing stop-press report of Philip K. Dick as having died on "2/3 March." Excuses about incomplete information were as nothing to the chorus of agreement that it was very like Dick to die on an indeterminate day.

Feedback. I am disgusted to have received none, merely because this is the first column. People have no enterprise.

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**J.G. BALLARD** - a critical monograph by David Pringle. Copies available from IZ's address. See advert on page 70 of this issue for further details. Also for sale: copies of *Interzone: The 2nd Anthology*, paperback edition.

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## COMING NEXT MONTH IN INTERZONE

Kim Stanley Robinson visits "Red Mars." We also have fine new fishy stories from Diane Mapes ("She-Devil") and Ian Watson ("Swimming with the Salmon"), plus several other pieces of fiction, interviews with leading authors and all our usual non-fiction features and reviews. So watch out for the September *Interzone*, on sale in August.

**I**t is something like the heft of cathedral tunes, and something like the Heavenly Hurt that leaves no scar, but internal difference, where the Meanings, are. We quote Emily Dickinson, gaunt and nude within the Gothic coverlets of the New England spinsterhood which served her. We are thinking of Margaret St. Clair, whose *Agent of the Unknown* (1956) must be one of the earliest examples of the Puppet Dark tale; and of Mark S. Geston, whose *Lords of the Starship* (1967) mixes Puppet Dark and Dying Earth; and of John Crowley, whose *The Deep* (1975) is a Pocket Universe story set in an enclosed world – it is the concave palm of a God upraised into the immensity of a starless welkin – which is a perfect model of the inherent mise-en-scène of the Puppet Dark tale; and of Gene Wolfe, whose *There Are Doors* (1988) returns us to the erotic subtext of Margaret St. Clair's beautiful little novel, to the pathos of the longing for exogamy with the God, who will burn us out like Semele; and of William Barton, of whose *Dark of William: An Ahriman Novel* (Bantam Spectra, \$4.99) it is enough to note, at the moment, that Ahriman is the dark god of Zoroaster who engages in fateful combat the god of light, Ahura Mazdah; and might well win.

A Puppet Dark tale may be defined as an sf or fantasy story whose hero is in some sense a projection or avatar of a God or godlike figure behind the arras of the plot; but who does not turn out, in the end, to be the God. (This caveat distinguishes the Puppet Dark tale from the vastly more numerous category of stories in which the amnesiac hero turns out to be his own father or god, or in which the heroine who has denied her menstrual roots turns out to be her own mother or the Earth Herself.) The hero of the Puppet Dark tale – he or she will typically be an android, or computer projection, or tied clone, or ghost – is, in other words, the dark twin of the Competent Man whose wet-dreams have engined the official Future Histories of most American (and some coat-clinger UK) sf writers. In a Puppet Dark tale the hero does not penetrate the barrier of the unknown, for the unknown is the god-fist within his skull; and he is dermis, a penetration tool, Punch in the night.

*Agent of the Unknown*, which was called "Vulcan's Dolls" on its magazine publication in 1952, is the paradigm text for the Puppet Dark story. The hero, who turns out to be an android toy of the godlike Vulcan, has been constructed to perform unknowingly certain tasks – his actions help release the genetic potential of the human race, which then prepares to leap beyond his ken – and afterwards to "rest." He is entrapped in a plot he cannot understand, he aches with exogamous passions for human women

(who die on him), and for Vulcan (who strokes him like a beloved pet), and in the end, his functions fulfilled, he is turned off, allowed to drown in the mothering waves of a pleasure planetoid. The story is compact, elegiac, lucid, dry-voiced; and absolutely dark. It is no wonder that Margaret St. Clair remains virtually unknown to the world of sf, that she remains one of the genre's great Voices to the Contrary. (One of the Interzone collective's early mistakes – which this reviewer ineffectually opposed – was its refusal to publish either of the stories she submitted to us.) And *Dark Sky Legion* is, in parts, a worthy successor.

**T**he main problem with the book is the 400 pages of long paper. It may be that William Barton is difficult to edit, or that Bantam operate a laissez-faire policy with the texts they publish, or that both Barton and Bantam are in agreement about the book: given its inherent merit, one rather hopes the latter is the case. But. Nevertheless. *Dark Sky Legion* reads as though it had been written – as most books are today, just as this review is being written – on a computer; and if it doesn't exactly overstay its welcome the way books used to when they went on too long, it does, all the same, give off a sense that too many luxuriant repetitions of the moody bits were patched into the text, just to make sure. (In the old days, when they were written consecutively, books grew too long; nowadays, when they can be assembled from tesseract blocks like vast mosaics, a book is likely to become too long at any point, and then get short again, maybe.) *Dark Sky Legion* could have had about 100 pages of luxuries culled from it, all the way through. Certain repeated phrases – most noticeably those underlying the protagonist's sense that he is 1) mortal, 2) immortal, 3) young, 4) old – sound almost like extremely sub-Homeric heroic tags; and some of the inserted passages illustrative of the protagonist's experiences in earlier incarnations give off a similar sense of being inserted according to the cod algorithms generated by software options.

What is good about the book is pretty well everything else. The immediate plot is not complex: the protagonist, a representative of the Metastable Order which maintains a uniformitarian hegemony over the human galaxy,

# The Puppet Dark

## John Clute

comes to the planet Olam to ensure that its population has not veered too radically from the norm, and accomplishes his mission. The underlying structure of the novel, however, is less straightforward. The tale is told from the point of view, though not in the voice, of its protagonist, Maaron Denthorion, the 66th incarnation of the 33rd branching of the original Denthorion, who himself remains on Earth, thousands of years away. Our Maaron – the Maaron who features in *Dark Sky Legion* – awakens from something like slumber in the Metastable Vectorship Naglfar, which has settled into orbit around Olam, and is beamed down to the planet's surface to do his job. Two circumstances should be noted, however: Maaron has been "asleep" because, in Barton's universe (as in ours) there is no such thing as FTL travel, and he is now dozens of segments of "sleep" from home, from Earth, from the "normalcy" he must enforce; and each time he is sent through the "transceiver" he suffers something like instantaneous death and rebirth, so that he is snuffed out (and rekindled in his glorious young manhood) every time he lands upon a planet. He is a node of information clothed in flesh. All flesh is, of course, grass; and Maaron has burned hundreds of grass huts of flesh to ash in his passage through the dark. All flesh is grass. But the information node – the soul – is, of course, permanent.

This is what he believes. What *Dark Sky Legion* gradually tells us is, of course, that Maaron is a vessel or puppet of the God who rides within Naglfar, the AI who ostensibly obeys his commands but who, in fact, operates him to dreadful effect; that he is, in effect, a computer-generated simulacrum based on edited memories of previous simulacra. But we do not immediately begin to sniff the wrongness of Maaron, or of the Metastable Order he represents, because we are seeing Olam through his eyes, and it is clear that much has indeed gone wrong there: surviving representatives of Olam's native species, for instance, have deteriorated into pets, whom the human intruders treat with callous savagery. And the charismatic religious faith in a Starship Heaven, to which many Olamites adhere, is a cruel fraud: for the Heaven to which true believers ascend through transceivers is in fact a huge orbital factory

whose machinery is run by edited versions of these deluded souls in a state of sickly, computer-induced serenity. So there is a job to do.

But Maaron is himself extraordinarily serene. And it is not at all clear that his sense of what is wrong is going to be easy to share. Gradually, indeed, we learn that we have been gulled by our readerly assumption that the figure we identify with will behave as we might dream of doing, that the Metastable Order whose vision of normalcy he enacts is no worse than value-neutral (like most distant Empires in this sort of fiction). We have, in fact, been more thoroughly gulled than we were by Iain (M) Banks in *Consider Phlebas* (1987; reviewed in Interzone 20), where it took us most of the book to realize that its protagonist was on the wrong side in a war between two visions of reality. But at least in that book the protagonist was making a mistake. In *Dork Sky Legion*, where the gulling is equally deliberate and the resulting lesson even more pointed, Maaron Dentheurion is the wrong side, and when he does his job on Olam – it is the thousandth time he's done the same job – we come to see that, as readers, we have been supping with abomination. Ahriman has won, the god-fits shut. Within, the dark is puppet.

The difference between a tale of revenge and a palindrome is that you don't have to read a tale of revenge twice. In both cases, of course, the beginning is transformed into its reversal, the biter is bit, the end becomes the beginning; but the palindrome shoves itself into your face backwards, and *Wolf Flow* (St Martin's Press, \$18.95) slides like raw butter down the long hill into itself. It is something like K.W. Jeter's 14th novel, and it is very skilful indeed, and comfy with itself in its bleak barren beyond-outrage splatter manner, far more naturally told and held in the mind than his last book, the negligent and blowzy *Madlonds* (1989).

It is, of course, a horror novel, and the mise-en-scène constructed with some care in the earlier pages – the tale is set mainly in rural Oregon, a sort of sand-blasted Twin Peaks – comes apart at the joints at the climax, where the dandiacal nada nada of Horror reigns, reducing all to an abhorrent refusal. But the trip is fun. The protagonist, left for dead on a rural highway by drug-dealers he's been trying to outflank, finds himself in a ghostly sanitarium once famous for its sulphurous waters, but long burned out and abandoned. We soon find out why. We soon learn about the sulphurous waters, sort of stuff. It is ultimately very silly and pursed, but those are the rules of the game of horror, and Jeter plays by the rules, down to the last turn of palindrome, when we can look back, and

see what it is that stares us in the face. Being allergic to the mode, I would not myself presume to say what it is that bites itself in the tale of horror, or stares back: but I guessed it was probably here, in this book, and that Jeter knew he had passed it over to us.

Note: Robert Westall's *The Stones of Muncaster Cathedral: Two Stories of the Supernatural* (Viking, £8.99) assembles two remarkably neat and cagily interwoven tales. The first (reminiscent in setting and import, though not in pace or presence, of Walter de la Mare) describes the nature of the curse that has haunted a cathedral tower, through the eyes of a steeplejack whose son is threatened by a recurrence of the evil; the second psychologizes an apparent ghost story, in which an apparently dead woman from World War II haunts a student in 1955: but we know from the beginning that she's not dead, and who, in fact, she is; and the story rather loses in the end by making a circumstantial-choked meal of the obvious. Not major work, but the two tales, like flying buttresses supporting each other in a kind of marriage, are more than the sum of the parts. Yes, you sort of say when you close the book, these stories will stand. Good.

(John Clute)

## The Past is an Alien Country

### Mary Gentle

I had occasion recently to be at a Live Role Play conference (read "outdoor Tolkien theatre") at a panel billed as being on "authentic" clothing. People interested in medieval dress wanted to know how one would make one's costume sufficiently ragged to be an authentic peasant. Rip the seams? Sandpaper the cuffs?

It was at this point that the realization crept up on me: none of these people had ever been poor.

In our culture, where something's out of fashion in six months and falling apart by a year, it's a leap of the imagination to conceive of clothing that is (a) warm and (b) durable enough to be a legacy in someone's last will and testament. But everyone knows – don't they? – that mended clothes last longer, that peasants hem and patch and darn like hell, when those are the only clothes they've got...

Nah. Peasants are ragged. Ask Hollywood.

Which brings me to Connie Willis's *Doomsday Book* (Bantam, \$22 & \$10). The trouble with Kivrin, the British student in 2054 AD who time-travels to the 14th century, is that she has never been poor. She has never been

immersed since day one in the importance of class – Britain might have a "classless society" by 2054, but my money isn't on it. And I still don't know whether Willis's peasants are intended to be freemen or serfs – this, by the way, is akin to reading a novel set in South Africa and not knowing whether the characters are intended to be black or white.

Actually, *Doomsday Book* is a very readable novel, it has page-turning qualities in abundance. Dunworthy, a somewhat colourless Oxford don (Oxford's elite snobishness has also got a bit mislaid by 2054), is unwillingly part of an experiment to send another college student – of whom he is paternally fond – back to 1320. She goes equipped with language lessons and a biochem translator, and a subcutaneous device to record her commentary when she raises her hands in the position of prayer.

She also goes without the proper unmanned probes, as part of another don's efforts to have a Success while the head of department is absent over the Christmas holidays. As Kivrin is sent, the temporal technician Badri collapses, and Dunworthy and his medical friend Mary are soon in the middle of a mysterious, lethal epidemic. Meanwhile Kivrin arrives, falls sick, is tended, and loses the location of the dropzone where she can be recovered. The spectre of plague begins to hover, both in the 14th and 21st centuries.

The past requires a leap of the imagination, more than the future, maybe. *Doomsday Book* mentions smell once – and then forgets it. Ever lived with woodsmoke? There are also no birds (the medieval sky even in winter we would have thought full), and surprisingly little casual brutality, and a very "protestant" pre-Reformation Catholicism, and none of the sheer unimportance of women. When Kivrin falls among the nobility – Eliwys, her daughters Rosemund and Agnes, her mother-in-law Imayne – there is an arranged marriage in the offing, but that's it.

The truth of the 14th century is complex, it lies somewhere between the Wife of Bath and the assumption of Eve's guilt, but one thing it does not lie in are liberal interpersonal relationships. In the 1300s you are a miller first, and Tom, Dick, or Harry second. Kivrin's village, by the way, has a church but no mill. And I hope by publication someone has corrected the stone effigy of a knight wearing cuirasses on his hands – a neat trick, given that a cuirass is a breastplate...

Tellingly, of the three real characters in the book, two are children. There is Mary's great-nephew Colin in the 21st century, whose age it is difficult to judge, but might be about twelve; and Agnes, who is five; and the childlike

Father Roche, the priest who assumes that Kirvin is her namesake, St Catherine. The problem is Kirvin – a child, in that she has no history.

*Doomsday Book* has courage in its destination: not 1320 but 1348, a year whose implications are carried remorselessly through. However, it's let down by a cavalry-over-the-hill moment, and the last-minute advent of a widget which, if carefully examined, turns it all into an idiot plot.

**C**ount Geiger's Blues (Tor, \$19.95) is subtitled in parentheses, "A Comedy," and Michael Bishop's latest does smack more than somewhat of James Branch Cabell and Kurt Vonnegut. The hero – and I use the term advisedly – is one Xavier Thaxton, fine-arts columnist on the Solonika Urbanite, who has something of the wistful faith in art to inspire man to superman that Cabell's writer-protagonists have. His world, however, is Cabellian in the sense that it doesn't give a toss about the fine arts. It likes fast food, heavy metal concerts, and comic books.

Xavier Thaxton is a semi-devotee of Nietzsche, that progenitor of the Übermensch, and views himself as "a superior man." And Xavier is about to fall foul of a radiation-induced plot device. Whilst covering a George Bernard Shaw festival out of town, he goes midnight skinny-dipping in a creek near a power station, said creek also inhabited by toads the size of dogs, and a three-eyed luminous catfish...

Solonika is skewed-present/near-future American south. There's a juvenile fashion for retropunk, as featured by Xavier's heavy-metal comix-fan nephew, The Mick. The Mick is a nicely obnoxious teenager, landed on Xavier by his disaster-relieving parents on their way to Bangladesh, who proves a good sidekick.

Sidekick? Well, it's like this. The wimp hero works for a newspaper. His girlfriend's a jet-setting fashion designer. Hero is mentor and friend to a teenage boy (except when the boy is being his mentor). An accident inspired by radiation, a modernist city with a tacky crime district straight out of the 1930s... I assure you, there are perfectly serious reasons for Xavier Thaxton putting on a silvery body stocking uniform and going out to fight crime. Honest.

Two strands of this book sit slightly uneasily together. There is your basic comedy of the Philistine Syndrome – after his exposure to the rogue radiation, Xavier finds that Mozart makes him throw up, Shaw makes him queasy, cordon bleu food crashes his system, and art exhibitions make him keel over. Health can only be restored by a diet of junk food, fixing his apartment with pink plastic flamingoes, and watching afternoon soaps on the TV.

Xavier swaps jobs with the Popular Culture columnist, and duly slams the Saloniaka-based Uncommon Comics launch of three new superheroes, one of which is a Count Geiger. Soon, some popular culture begins to upset Xavier's system – a heavy-metal band is here proclaimed to be Art. (I should have had more faith in this if some of the World's Classics had visibly ceased to trigger Xave's gag-reflex; if not all Popular Culture is bad, then surely not all Art is good?) Xavier discovers, by a confused train of events, that the experimental costume of the Count Geiger character steadies his system, but at the cost of becoming Geiger and acquiring his powers...

On the other hand, there's the radiation. What do you think happens to people who are exposed to nuclear waste? A critical plot-turn in Count Geiger's Blues concerns the illegal commercial dumping of outdated hospital cancer-therapy equipment. One piece of equipment, the Therac 4-J, survives dumping, hangs around in someone's pick-up truck, is burned in a fire – all except the critical cannister containing radioactive waste. This is opened by Larry Glenn Wilkins, whose little girl Carrie-Lisbeth is about to have a birthday party:

He rubbed a pinch of the powder on Carrie-Lisbeth's face: a stripe down her nose, a spot for each cheek, a thumb smear on her forehead. Even in daylight, the stuff gleamed glittery blue. The tip of his finger was like a firefly doing skywriting stunts right before her eyes.

It takes guts to set up a 1930s biopic against, if you like, Doctor Strangelove. Plenty of nits to pick: the dubious reverse-snobbery of the text in seeking to assure comix fans and skiffy readers that their fare is really Art, the hint that in stopping the ritualized abuse of women in the "Cutie Shoot," Xavier is wasting his superheroic time. But far more often than not, Count Geiger's Blues hits it square on the Swiftian button. Any novel that can include the following gag as a throwaway is fine by me:

On the wall behind the gun store's main counter was a banner declaring AN ARMED SOCIETY IS A POLITE SOCIETY, a motto indirectly accounting for the flood of etiquette books from Beirut, Peshawar, Belfast, and East Los Angeles.

Bishop follows through remorselessly the logic of his premise: there can be no cavalry riding over the hill for this superman.

**S**peaking of supermen, Julian May's **J**ack the Bodiless (HarperCollins, £14.99) is a murder mystery about politics and parapsychology and alien contact set in the not-too-distant future, and is by way of being a prequel to the "Pliocene Exile" quartet. It features the

family from which the leader of those novels' Metapsychic Rebellion came, the Remillard (a highly prolific Catholic family well into political fingaling who keep striking Kennedy resonances throughout), and also, the most powerful mind ever born.

Jack is not an easy book to come to if you haven't read the others (or Intervention) recently. The reader isn't given too much recapitulatory help. The Metapsychic Rebellion, you may recall, was by a group of human operant psychics against the various alien races who are overseeing humanity's graduation into the galactic milieu – a pleasing ambiguity exists about whether the aliens are intent on turning humanity into responsible beings, or a cooperative hive-mind, and whether revolt is or isn't justifiable.

Set in the run-up to the rebellion, *Jack the Bodiless* features Marc Remillard, the leader, as a young teenager; and is largely narrated by his uncle Rogi, one of those sub-Heinleinian old rogues one is supposed to warm to immediately. Given that all the other Remillards have PK, telepathy, deathwish, and any other psychic power one cares to mention, as well as immense political power, they do present difficulties as reader-identification figures...

The plot begins with Teresa, wife of Paul Remillard (would-be president of Earth), becoming pregnant despite all warnings that her child may carry destructive genes. Rogi and Marc contrive to hide her, and Rogi and Teresa hole up in a Bigfoot reservation somewhere Far North. Where is Robert Service when we need him? The child, Jack, is born, is powerful, but that – as one might guess from the title – is not all he is.

Meanwhile someone is murdering operant humans, and the psychic finger of suspicion points to the extensive Remillard clan: their sisters and their cousins whom they reckon up by dozens. The killing is being done by Hydra, a group mind that could be conscious, or could be lurking in five people's unconscious minds; under the control of Fury, a mind that may be a remnant of the dead (and evil) Victor Remillard, or may be something quite other.

One of the tenets of murder mysteries is suspense, and suspense is not a quality you will find much of in *Jack the Bodiless*. The plot suffers from the events of the Rebellion already being known. The identity of Hydra is duly discovered, but in a slew of too many Remillards for it to matter much. And as if that isn't enough, we're told on page 418:

[Hydra] remained at large, doing what they were told to do, until nearly twenty-three Earth years had passed and the Diregent Dorothea Macdonald, who came to be known

as Diamond Mask, finally neutralized their threat... That story will be told in the second book of this trilogy, Diamond Mask.

Why would one read it, knowing the plot summary? Uncharitably, one could think that *Jock the Bodiless* is an action-loop solely designed to get Jack on-stage. On the other hand it is possible that none of this is actually what *Jack* is about. There's a case for it being about a carnival of strange alien races, and the human interaction with beings from intelligent vegetables to angels. About being young and metaphysic, which means you drive your ice-spiked motorcycle very fast indeed. About being a hanger-on, as Rogi is, around a powerful political clan, but with (as is hinted at with Rogi) inestimable powers of one's own, or on one's own side.

Read as being about people who come to be called Diamond Mask, or who exist without much in the way of physical bodies, it becomes something else again: a glittering baroque extravaganza. The fact that it dwells a little too lovingly on a baby dying, painfully and over a long period of time, from cancer, is worrying. But this is the world in which rejuvenation exists, DNA can be retrofitted, and it takes a lot for death to be final. Somewhere under the murder mystery is a book about what it might be to be a different kind of humanity.

**B**ack to one of the more alien imports from the past — *The Dedalus Book of Femmes Fatales* (Dedalus, £7.99) cries out for a companion volume, say, *The Dedalus Book of Demon Lovers*, to put from a female viewpoint that 19th-century Romantic trope: that sex is bad, irresistible, overwhelming, destructive, and the other gender's fault.

This volume features a useful introduction by Brian Stableford on the whyfores of the femme fatale, and a 19th-century section bringing together the expected — Keats, Baudelaire, Swinburne, Poe — with some lesser-known stories: "Amore Dure" by "Vernon Lee," for example, which is a dyke tale if one knows the sex of the author, which must prove more about the 19th century than about gender stereotypes. There are also contemporary texts, one by a woman — Storm Constantine's "Poisoning the Sea," a languid story of Circe from Circe's viewpoint — the rest by men. These bring together Brian Stableford's "Salome," Brian Craig's "The Woman in the Mirror," both more about obsession than desire, and Francis Amery's "Self-Sacrifice," which Interzone readers may recognize from an earlier issue, and whose theme of child abuse and destroying the world to save it sits only a little oddly with the siren theme of the book. Other contributors include Thomas Ligotti,

Kim Newman, and Ian McDonald. Illustrations include Greta Garbo and Grace Jones. Now that's alien history. (Mary Gentle)

## Awful Warnings and Alma Sedgewick

Stephen Baxter

A Yorkshire Post reviewer once wrote of the early work of Robert Sheekley that it was "excellent...it does not hide an awful warning of the urban chaos and anarchy that may be nearer than we think." Simon Ings's first novel *Hot Head* (Grafton, £4.99), unlike Sheekley's work, is crammed full of such warnings, and — again in contrast to Sheekley — doesn't contain too many laughs.

*Hot Head* is a cyberpunk thriller which, while flawed and uneven in tone, is never less than interesting; and it marks out Ings as one to watch further. It takes us to a near-future Europe shattered by waves of immigration and by ecological disaster; and if that wasn't enough a series of rogue Von Neumann self-replicating devices are on their way from the Moon and beyond, smashing cities with girders hurled from space.

The novel's central figure is Malise. With her brain augmented by dodgy military implants called datafat, Malise is, as the back cover informs us, "the only woman who can save the world." The structure of the book consists of two interwoven narrative strands, one of which describes Malise's ghastly formative years leading up to her first encounter with a hostile AI — the Lunar-based rogue known as Moonwolf — while the second strand takes us through to Malise's final, climactic and enjoyably spectacular battle with an even worse AI from Jupiter.

This double-stranding narrative has its disadvantages. Since the later thread takes up after the successful (for Malise) conclusion of her assault on Moonwolf we lose much of the tension from the flashback thread, and furthermore it becomes difficult to detect to what extent Malise is changed, or forced to grow, as a result of her misadventures — which, as she plummets from one crisis to another, come to seem almost picaresque.

But at least the double-stranding does allow us to cut to the chase and so escape the gruesome catalogue of disasters which make up Malise's flashback early life. Her mother is shot in the back while cradling Malise as an infant; her father, riddled by guilt for his work as a military hardware

designer, beats Malise; Malise barely survives a starring role in a Virtual Reality snuff movie; and, it seems, anyone who comes close enough to her to show her any semblance of tenderness — from the woman Seval, the "world's last gipsy," to Lennox, one of her colleagues during the final battle — must soon, like a Star Trek red-jacket, expect a sticky end. One begins to speculate if Malise, the Alma Sedgewick of the *Hot Head* world, should have her implant replaced by a Government health warning.

Although Ings, in a final infodump, makes clear how essential all this suffering is to the resolution of the novel's central conflict, suffer the poor woman certainly does, and so do we. In the end the bleakness of the novel's tone and world view is rather wearying.

**T**he novel runs with many of the tropes familiar from the fiction of the last few years — rogue AIs, Virtual Realities, augmented personalities, ecological collapse — and treats these themes with mixed success. Ings's holodeck wonderlands tend to have a refreshing and surprising Englishness about them, for example, with dream copies of Edwardian seaside towns and Alice-like doors to nowhere labeled OPEN ME. However there have been many more sinister AIs than these in recent fiction; Ings's foes seem too anthropomorphized. We are told they turn their eyes to the skies, they laugh, they declare independence... Declare independence? Couldn't they be bobbed off with a referendum, then?

In any event the presence of all these familiar elements in the mix gives an oddly dated feel to much of the prose. There are passages crammed with cyber-standard highspeed technojargon (although the tone of the novel is uneven — uncertain perhaps — and at times the voice lapses into an almost Vonnegutian simplicity of detail and vocabulary), and there is an even more antique feel to Ings's primary method of overcoming the perennial problem of the infodump. He opens the book with a direct address from omniscient author/narrator straight to the reader, a straightforward essay about Ings's grave new world leavened by a few references to the actual characters. We do pick up the people before long, but Ings lapses into omniscience throughout the book, popping back helpfully to make sure we understand what's going on. This narrative style gets in the way of the story, and tests Ings's readers' patience, not least because we don't actually need the background to follow much of the central conflict.

But among this hotchpotch of methods the most effective passages tend to be sections of straightforward, unselfconscious prose, particularly some episodes of vividly imagined grisliness. One of Malise's many

experiences of death, for example, is to be run over in the shared consciousness of a dog (I won't pause to explain), Ings has the almost malicious eye of the best horror writers, and this spires his work of sf much as Simmons, for example, enriched the *Hyperion* books with similar elements. A horror novel by Ings, in fact, could be a prospect worth waiting for.

Simon Ings made his name with a series of short stories in *Interzone*, *Other Edens III* and other places — stories which have contained a startling freshness and bizarreness of vision which have marked him out as a potentially "incandescent" talent, as Colin Greenland notes in a cover blurb. Given this expectation, *Hot Head* is something of a disappointment. At one level it's an entertaining enough cyberpunk thriller, but Ings clearly has greater ambitions; what we are left with, though, is an uncertainty of touch evidenced by a hotch-potch of methods. There is much to enjoy and praise — chunks of fine writing which glow through the narrative like fragments of coal — but *Hot Head* does not deliver the mind-blowing otherness of the best of Ings's short stories.

We need new dangerous visions like those of Simon Ings; once he finds his novelistic touch — and, hopefully, doesn't ask us to take his awful warnings quite so seriously — then it may be that Ings will indeed, as Greenland suggests, make the rest of us redundant.

(Stephen Baxter)

There is a second winner this month in Mayer Alan Brenner's *Spell of Fate* (*The Dance of Gods #3, Daw*, £4.99). I suggest Daw get someone higher up in their editorial hierarchy to read this because it looks to me like a book that could well have been a hit if they had spent a little money on it. It's printed as one of those bog-standard by-the-yard fantasy novels with yellow-edged pages; there isn't even the most cursory "story so far" and the inside cover blurb is what appears to be a randomly selected (and not terribly representative) bit of the text. The back cover blurb reads like a synopsis that's been Chinese-whispered around the building until someone said "will this do?" When I resorted to reading the ads for the previous two books inside the back cover to find out who was I found that the ad for the book I was reading said it was about a world of "hilarious havoc."

No, sorry. For the first 200 pages I hadn't the faintest idea what was going on but I was utterly hooked. It's not a belly-laugh-inducing parody of a fantasy so much as an off-the-wall kind of fantasy in its own right: there is a first-person character who doesn't know his own name but is lumbered with a magical link to a minor god, a magic sword with a mind of its own and someone else hiding in his head; there is a heroine who is a splendidly realized librarian, fully aware of all the clichés about being an absent-minded scruffbag but too intelligent to be overly bothered about it, and there is an amazing hero called Max the Vaguely Disreputable to whom utterly preposterous things can happen (hands frozen in a block of stone, surrounded by dozens of enemy troops and liberated by a passing iceberg). The nearest I can get to the general tenor is *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* with magic rings instead of talking pens. Can I have volumes 1, 2 and 4 please?

Thirdly, I also recommend *The Towers of the Sunset*, L.E. Modesitt, Jr.'s sequel to *The Magic of Recluce* (*Tor*, \$21.95), although with some reservations. In this book we learn how Recluce, the land of order-magic, came to be founded by Creslin and Megaera, unwanted spare royals linked together by a magic bond and pressurized from all sides until they colonize Recluce as somewhere so desolate no-one else will want it. My qualms come mainly from the setting: Creslin is a man raised in a land ruled by the Legend which says that a man should never be allowed to rule because it was men who got the angels thrown out of heaven.

Well, fair enough, and Creslin's reaction to being eyed up by his mother's female warriors has an authentic ring to it. However Megaera is also brought up in a Legend territory but her first

reaction to the enforced link to Creslin is a horror at being bound to a mere man. Once they flee outside Legend territory, though, and encounter patriarchy, Megaera's resistance and Creslin's utter insensitivity to her feelings ring false. Surely it would never occur to either of them that Creslin could dominate Megaera if they have been raised to think there are so many things that can't be done by a mere man. No, the Legend stuff is well done but once outside that territory they should still both have the Legend in their heads and neither of them does. Still it's a better run-of-the-mill piece.

**M**ercedes Lackey's *Magic's Pawn* (*Book One of The Last Herald-Mage*; *Roc* £4.99) reads like the first draft of something which might have been really good. Ignore the back cover blurb (an inept and inaccurate plot summary) and coast through the first third of the book (a thin society mishmashed together from bits of Pern and a hint of Alice) and keep going to the first of Lackey's several gear changes. The hero is a male Menolly, heir to a brutal father terrified that the boy is too pretty to be straight and whose idea of toughening him up is to let his armstrongs bully, bludgeon and beat him into a suitable machismo. After the broken arm the boy changes his tactics and is exiled with his sorcerous aunt who has him educated to his strengths, not his weaknesses. The book moves out of "by the yard" territory when one of the aunt's other students initiates the hero into his father's fear. The homosexual affair is described movingly but there follows another gear change when the wild magic that is unleashed by the lover complicates everyone's lives into a potential trilogy if not a series. Patchy but very promising.

**T**ime in Mind by Kathryn S. Starbuck (*Grafton*, £3.99) posits a world where the hippies turn out to have been right after all. It's a competent enough New Age fantasy where we all died of AIDS but there are still a few communes surviving full of ganja and crystals and developed mental energies. A psychokinetic bully brings the whole system to a halt and has higher souls trying to stop him by wafting in and out of the rainbow in our heads like no-one's business.

**M.Y.T.H. Inc. in Action** by Robert Asprin (*Legend*, £3.99) is narrated by Guido, one of Skeeve's mobster bodyguards, who is involved in a preposterous plot to stop an expanding empire by joining its army and sabotaging it from within whereas of course the solution was to leave it alone and let it collapse under the weight of its own taxes. This book shows up the limitations of this otherwise amusing series: Guido speaks and writes a kind of Guys'n'Dolls Runyonesque but the

## Horses for Courses

### Wendy Bradley

Three winners and a lot of also-rans this month.

First of all Sheila Gilluly provides a breath of fresh air in *The Giant of Inishkerry* (*The Second Book of the Painter*; *Headline*, £15.99). Well, yes, it's a terrible title, I agree, but that's the only naff thing about the book. Aengus' progress along the hero trail was interrupted at the end of the first book when the bad guys killed everybody else off. Here we begin with him as a sort of dark Robin Hood, calling himself The Haunt and killing off the bad guys in between raiding with a crew of dwarf pirates (hence he's the "giant" of the title). He gets mixed up again with high politics and tangles with both fearsome and friendly spectres, all three manifestations of the goddess and a fair amount of dwarf pirate intrigue. Gilluly takes traditional genre elements and swirls them around into new patterns in the same way that Aengus makes pictures (and magic) out of poured coloured sands. Recommended.

book lacks Skeeve's naive charm and isn't any funnier for his absence. Mildly amusing but recommended only for Asprin completists.

**G**ypsy by Steven Brust and Megan Lindholm (Tor, \$18.95) is problematic: one of those books that makes you wonder just what has happened to someone who seemed so promising. What seems to have happened to Brust is that he exploded onto the scene with stuff he didn't care about but which was mildly brilliant and has now built himself enough of a reputation to do things he does care about, which seem to be Hungarian and Gypsy themes. Reminds me of my English "A" level when I was sternly warned not to write about anything to do with feminism because I lost my ability to write when I lost my objectivity. Gypsy, for example, took me three attempts to get into and I had to devote a full day of the Easter holiday to it because it seemed to me completely impervious to casual reading. The style involves lurching short snatches from different viewpoints and if you read a couple of them and then stop, getting back into the book is about as easy as getting back onto a rollercoaster half way round.

Three gypsies, three cops (two old and one young) and three women (two crones and an adolescent) battle a lady demon and her minions. A wandering archetype, the Coachman, offers the cops turning points of probability and only the young one accepts and changes his course in life. Not at all clear what is happening for much of the time, although absorbing enough in the bits you understand. However I refuse to believe a tambourine could ever sound threatening, even if you do write it as doom teko teko teko doom teko tek.

(Wendy Bradley)

## Murky Fable

### Chris Gilmore

**T**here may be nothing new under the sun, but in *PlainSong: A Fable for the Millennium* by Deborah Graeben (Pan, £4.50) we have at least an unusual combination: a sexless rural idyll and some fairly heavy blasphemy. As the story opens, almost the whole human race has died from a plague which attacks most severely those who live stressful lives. The few survivors include a number of children, an illiterate moron (unfairly called an idiot) and Julia, a pregnant poetess. (Though one would never guess it from the cover, where she looks as if she's wondering whether to swallow or spit it out.) This being a fable, there are also animals who, in the manner of fable, converse rationally with the humans and among

themselves. Many of them, for reasons never explained, have adopted the speech patterns attributed to the deserving poor in English novels of the 1930s, though an occasional Americanism slips through – or halfway through. Nowhere else have I met anyone who couldn't give "a flying damn."

So far, so idyllic; if a sentimental wish-fulfilment dream is rarely so nakedly contingent on several billion deaths, such is the morality of overpopulation. But some of the beasts have been around for many millennia, as have some of the humans who also gradually coalesce around Julia, awaiting her Time. These include the nymph Calypso, one-time companion of Odysseus, and Max, aka Ahaseurus, the Wandering Jew. Max would surely not have survived the plague had he not been cursed with immortality, for he tends to favour such stressful activities as getting Julia with child during a one-night stand in Bloomsbury. He also has frequent converse with Jesus, whose character has taken a turn for the worse over the centuries. He, too, is awaiting the Time, but more in the spirit of Herod than the Redeemer. He suspects the child is set to usurp his Godhead, and is disinclined to move over.

This is the only source of tension in a short but slow-moving book, but I have to admit its adequacy. Against all reason, not to mention all prejudice, *PlainSong* works. There are books so bad that one staggers through them in a state of avid horror – surely it can't get any worse, you tell yourself, fingers crossed that it will. My reaction was akin to this, but not the same; apart from some of the dialogue, it's not at all badly written, and the tone is extremely even, though the editing is weak: ordinance for ordnance, domina for dominae, the story of Kartaphilos ascribed to Ahaseurus, and described as biblical. What kept me turning the pages was genuine curiosity – what would she come up with next? In the end I was to be disappointed; the conflict fizzles out in the milk of human kindness, and although everyone pretends to be in a tearing hurry, it clearly matters not a jot whether they arrive together or in time.

The book's principal defect as a fable is that the general divorce of cause and effect brings about a total lack of a moral framework. Ms Graeben doesn't merely disdain to answer such questions as why Calypso and sundry beasts are immortal, why Julia's little fling should precipitate the plague, or how the new polity should be ordered; she is patently unaware that such questions get asked. Had she been so aware, I'm sure she could never have written it, but the result is a book that can't be accepted on its own terms. Never mind – I'll take it on my own. I'm sure such was never her intention, but Ms Graeben has achieved a notable literary grotesque.

(Chris Gilmore)

## Somewhere Else

### Neil Jones

**Y**ou, along with everyone else in the UK, will know the feeling now: profound disorientation, even dislocation; accompanied perhaps by an emotional reaction ranging from despair to (in some cases) elation. The feeling will have been especially pronounced if the shift occurred with you asleep, giving you no chance to adjust as the change unfolded – you will have woken that morning and known: the world – or perhaps me – is no longer as it ought to be. Something has changed in the very fabric of reality. Of course, back on that morning of 9th April 1992 with the pollsters confounded, being a sf reader you will at least have known the score. Clearly events weren't meant to turn out like this. So you, along with (as it turned out) the rest of the nation, had clearly been shunted onto an alternative timeline.

That recent experience may help you appreciate an anthology of stories on the theme of what might have been if a whole string of elections had gone differently. Mike Resnick's *Alternate Presidents* (Tor, \$4.99) contains 28 stories spanning elections (American presidential only) from 1789 (Benjamin Franklin instead of George Washington) to 1988 (Dukakis beats you-know-who to find aliens running things). Daunted by the fine print of American history? Well Resnick provides a brief intro for each story that sets the historical scene. Sometimes it's very necessary: had you ever heard, for instance, of Samuel Tilden or Millard Fillmore? Even with the more familiar names – Aaron Burr or Huey Long, say – the events they connect to blur from this side of the Atlantic.

An interesting case in point is illustrated by, appropriately, the cover: an unknown gentleman, looking off-canvas, gleefully holds aloft a newspaper bearing the headline, "Truman Defeats Dewey." But, he did, didn't he? And that isn't Harry Truman, so it's Mr Dewey I presume, but...? Fortunately, Resnick clues us: "One of the closest elections in history came in 1948, when Ohio finally gave Harry S. Truman a victory over Thomas E. Dewey, at five o'clock in the morning. Perhaps the most famous political photo in history is the one that shows a smiling Truman holding up a copy of the Chicago Tribune which had jumped the gun and printed... (yes well, you've got the turnabout by now)... on the cover." Which I'll admit did make for one of the more intriguing covers I've come across recently, although perhaps Mike Resnick ought to put the word "American" alongside the "history" above).

The stories, as you'd expect, range

in quality. Most of the writers give the impression of people determined to make a statement, sometimes about events which are international enough to have touched on our own lives over here, but also some which will probably seem pretty obscure on the European shore. Although some stories don't make it much past the statement stage, there is strong work from both ends – and the middle – of that spectrum. 1828: Judith Moffett's "Chickasaw Slave" movingly deals with one man's response to the realities of slavery. 1936: "Kingfish" by Barry Malzberg, sets Huey Long against Adolf Hitler. 1964: Eileen Gunn's zanily credible "Fellow Americans" turns Tricky Dick Nixon into an influential talkshow host. 1968: "Dispatches From the Revolution" by Pat Cadigan reshapes some traumatic events to give us a world a whole lot worse than the one we've actually ended up with.

Whether you'll enjoy this collection depends on how much you like the game of alternate timelines in general and American ones in particular. Quite a few of these stories read rather like fictionalized historical essays (and alternate ones at that) than real-McCoy fiction, but it's still a worthwhile read – informative, too, although I suspect you're just as likely to remember the alternate history as the real stuff.

I've been trying to imagine a British version of this book, and I just can't; not, at least, a book that would be likely to appeal much to either the mass- or the select-markets. Which must say volumes about the difference between British and American attitudes to books and/or politics, but exactly what escapes me. Perhaps it's just that, even though some of us might be fascinated with the other routes history might have taken, very few of that number would be that bothered about seeing those alternate worlds fictionalized, at least if the stories were forced to focus on our alternate PMs. Of course, I could be wrong. Perhaps even now someone's planning just such an anthology. After all, it's interesting to speculate what some of those PMs might have done to us/saved us from. Especially what it would have meant now if Neil Kinnock had won on April 9th.

Another book dealing with an alternate world is **Chimeras** by Christopher Evans (Grafton, £5.99), although if there is any connection with our world it came long, long before there ever was a US of A. (Apart from the title, it bears no resemblance, thankfully enough, to last year's BBC TV serialization of the Stephen Gallagher novel *Chimera*, by the way.) The world it takes place in is very different from ours: although its inhabitants are human enough, it is technologically backward and ruled by a dictatorship

known as the Hierarchy (but perhaps their version of April 9th is approaching). The most important difference, and certainly the one the stories concern themselves with, is the talent a very few individuals have to create almost-living works of art – the chimeras of the title – out of thin air.

The master-artist of the age is a less than admirable man called Vendavo, and the five main segments of the book take us through his life-history. Chimeras is in fact a fix-up of a series of outstanding short stories, some of which you may already have encountered – two of them appeared in Interzone, "Transmutations" and "Artifacts." Individually the stories were excellent, and they are enhanced rather than diminished by being collected together here for the first time, along with a new coda to the series. (Given that this is a collection, though, with stories individually titled, Grafton should have put in a contents list, plus, for those who are interested, the original printing history of the stories. Surely it's long past time that British publishers started doing this as a matter of routine.)

Although Vendavo is the book's focus, the individual stories centre on other characters whose lives are affected by him in one way or another. Evans writes polished, satisfying prose, but he also tells involving stories. Also, just as master-artist Vendavo possesses a special artistry that makes his creations appear to come alive, Evans too has that extra something which does the same for his characters and the world that they inhabit. And (if that isn't enough to make you buy the book) there's the concept of the chimeras themselves, a fascinating metaphor for the whole creative process. This is fantasy but don't be put off by the label; it's head and shoulders above the Tolkienate trilogies it'll have to sit next to on the shelves. If you're really in the mood for something that's both imaginatively different and a cut above in terms of quality, then this is a book to buy.

Incidentally, one of the segments, "The Bridge," which won the BSFA award for best short story in 1990, appeared in David Garnett's Zenith 1 anthology – which was the very first book to be reviewed by the Jones/McIntosh reviewing team of which I am half. So what did we say about the story then? Well, I'm glad you're so interested: "...From the author of How to Write Science Fiction, 'The Bridge' is an exercise in how to do just that." Which holds true for the series as a whole, and this book.

(Neil Jones)

## A Hardcover Magazine Jones & McIntosh

Once upon a time, two people called Kristine Kathryn Rusch and Dean Wesley Smith came up with a very strange idea: a magazine of short fiction. Hardly strange, you say, there are a lot of them around. Well, perhaps, but this magazine took in stories from different genres plus the gaps between them – and it was a hardcover. But, you're probably saying, if it's a hardback then that makes it an anthology – a magazine is the sort of flimsy thing (apologies to Mr Pringle) I'm reading right now. Well maybe, but this magazine appeared quarterly, was available by subscription only, and to save us all any further argument Rusch and Smith christened it *Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine*.

*Pulphouse?* The name may seem like a sort of literary suicide note, but from it – after starting it on a shoestring, Rusch and Smith ran it for 12 issues, with both critical (they won the 1988 World Fantasy Award) and financial success before going onto other projects. Rusch is now editor of another magazine you may have heard of, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* (and there can't be any argument about what category that publication comes into) and Smith is editing something called *Pulphouse: A Weekly Magazine*. (Weekly? How's that for confidence?)

Now all of the above run counter to conventional wisdom, and in her foreword to *The Best of Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine* edited by Kristine Kathryn Rusch (St Martin's Press, \$22.95 – yes, it's a hardback) Kate Wilhelm delivers a vigorous trashing of "conventional wisdom" and the supposed ongoing death of the short story. The anthology (at least we think that's what we're supposed to call it) features 25 stories, with perhaps four of them in the straight sf category. Two of these – "Jamais Vu" by Geoffrey Landis and "Foresight" by Michael Swanwick – also appeared in Interzone, which is perhaps cheating a little but we'll let that pass because they're both good. Another Interzone regular, Greg Egan, is represented with "The Moral Virologist," an excellent story but not up to Egan's own top standards, and then there's Alan Brennert's clever "The Third Sex."

Amongst the rest, however you choose to classify it, there's almost nothing that doesn't earn its shelf-space, but a few stories particularly stand out. Adam Troy Castro made his first professional sale with "Clearance To Land," a chilling fantasy built around an airline hijack that ends –

well, somewhere a whole lot worse than Kansas. Imaginatively and unusually structured, the story bodes very well indeed for Castro's future if he can follow up with material of this calibre. Then there's "While She Was Out" by Edward Bryant, the story that opens the anthology, a taut tale of urban life taking a sudden dizzying turn into violence. This theme of suburban normality suddenly and irrevocably shattered is worked to similar good effect by Francis J. Matozzo in "Why Pop-Pop Died," in which a savage assault is rendered all the more frightening by the perspective of the child narrator. Somewhat gentler, though still disturbing in its very different way, is Susan Palwick's "Offerings," an updated fairy tale which casts a new light upon the Little People.

Lisa Tuttle's story "Bits and Pieces" has some excellent writing, and might have been a contender for the best story here, but it's a little let down by an ending which shifts the tale from surreal fantasy to gruesome reality with an uncomfortable – and unsatisfactory – jolt. There's almost the reverse problem with J.N. Williamson's "Public Places." Trapping an unsympathetic hero in a painstakingly described vile and stinking toilet might sound like a recipe for something humorous but trite. Instead Williamson plays it very straight and we get drawn into a claustrophobic living hell before the story dissipates into an uneasy surrealist ho-hum.

Elsewhere we get fantasy of a gentler kind in Charles de Lint's "The Soft Whisper of Midnight Snow" and a thin sword-&-sorcery offering from Harry Turtledove. Some pieces, such as Steve Perry's "Willy of the Jungle" and Nina Kiriki Hoffman's aptly-titled "Savage Breasts" tilt us towards humour. But there are many you'll find hard to slot into any particular niche, because this is anthology which sets out to parade a broad range of styles and ideas and that's its strong suit. If the collection does have a genre leaning, then it's towards horror and dark fantasy. A lot of the stories have a fair quotient of grisly detail, enough to cause queasiness at times, but it's important to say that in none of the stories is violence or horror used gratuitously.

All the fiction is consistently well-written, thoughtful and evocative and about the worst thing we can find to say about the book is you may have your work cut out to get hold of a copy because it's only published in the US so far. It's a shame that this impressive and rewarding collection isn't going to be generally available in bookshops in the UK. More to the point, it's a shame that nothing very much like it is getting published over here. What we found so refreshing about *PulpHouse* is that it eschews publishing pigeon-holing

and simply sets out its store as an entertaining collection of imaginative short fiction. Not hard sf. Not fantasy. Not horror. Just good.

[Neil Jones & Neil McIntosh]

## Small Horrors

First, Ramsey Campbell's most recent collection, *Waking Nightmares* (Tor, \$18.95). I'm not much of a straight horror fan, but I do like Campbell: the fantastic elements in his writing avoid or eclipse the too-familiar stereotypes of the genre, and he handles plot, background, and character well. This book starts with a good "M.R. James" story (not as good, though, as the beauty embedded in Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Gate of Angels*, which I was reading at the same time and must mention) and moves on to cover some familiar Campbell themes: organized religiosity with something rotten at its core, urban decay, children threatened by gaps in the world-fence to which adults are safely blind, and sick relationships embalmed by some supernatural fiat without appeal. Good stuff. It ought to be mentioned that this edition was published last year in the USA, and is dedicated to Bob Shaw and to his now-deceased wife, Sadie.

The other book to hand is *Darklands* edited by Nicholas Royle (Egerton Press, £2.95), a limited-edition anthology of "psychological horror" stories. On reading it I can understand why it failed to find a paying publisher. It contains some good stories, but I'm afraid it is very uneven, and some of its newer writers do even deserve to be damned by the epithet "promising." Others, however, are good, and I'd particularly note Julie Akhurst, whose "Small Pieces Of Alice" is one of the best tales here.

(Andy Robertson)

## Last Word on Nanotechnology? Chris Gilmore

Someone once calculated that if, since 1950, the Rolls Royce car had advanced pari passu with the computer, they could now do a million and a half mpg, go nearly twice the speed of light, cost £1.35 apiece, and you could get six of them on a pinhead. The last feature seems the least advantageous – in truth, outside information technology, what are extremes of miniaturization good for?

In *Unbounding the Future* by K. Eric Drexler & Chris Peterson with Gayle

Pergamit (Simon & Schuster, £16.99) the authors set about telling us, in a racy, gung-ho style that begs for scepticism – can it be as good as their scenarios promise? For instance, a woman has cancer. Her GP takes a sample, so as to identify its precise type (among over 16,000). Having done so, he injects her with an army of tiny machines, programmed to home in on that signature alone. Cell by cell they kill the cancer, which sloughs away. Their work done, so do the machines. I'll believe it when I see it, but I can imagine no worthier goal to strive for.

Other medical conditions which should be susceptible to the same approach include hardening of the arteries, osteoporosis and the progressive death of brain cells which we all suffer. Nano machines might be able to turn them back on, or more probably plug in as substitutes for them. Take away all of those, and what price death from natural causes?

There's a down side, of course. One can imagine similar technology being used for selective genocide, with the machines on this occasion programmed to target nerve cells which carry the signature of a particular race, for instance. A cure for cancer isn't worth the price of that getting into certain hands we could all name, which will doubtless prompt certain voices to demand an end to such research. Wrongly, I maintain; to criminalize anything is to cede it as a monopoly to the criminal class, in which we now include nations as well as individuals. A current nightmare is the possibility that Saddam, Gadaffi, Castro and the like might get nuclear weapons as well as ourselves. Bad enough in all conscience, but nothing beside the thought of their having them instead of us. The same goes for any advanced technology.

Neither cure nor plague is available yet. Nanotechnology, as the authors are at pains to emphasize, is not merely advanced miniaturization: it works from the bottom up, by manipulating individual molecules into larger assemblies. The big breakthrough will be the first general-purpose constructor which is also a self-replicator. To develop that may cost billions, but the second will cost nothing at all, and take virtually no time; on the nano scale, events happen with blinding speed. They each then produce another, and so exponentially, until there are enough to set about making whatever their owners want. How do they tell them what? Through their own on-board computers. It sounds like a pipedream, yet the authors maintain that though there are plenty of technical problems to overcome, there are no theoretical ones. Several approaches are already in train, and the big question is which will pay off first.

**S**cientists are often accused of insouciance about the social consequences of their activities; Von Braun, Teller and Lorentz tend to be cited, as is Einstein's wish that he'd taken up plumbing instead. This charge can't be levelled at Drexler *et al.* Having depicted a world without poverty, disease or pollution, they devote a chapter each to the problems nanotechnology can't address (principally those of original sin) and those it's likely to exacerbate (those of sophisticated and cultivated sin). I wish the last wasn't the weakest; compared to the passionate conviction of the chapters about industrial potential, references to regulatory bodies and controls in these contexts are desperately unconvincing.

Assuming (along with a lot of smart money) that their technical predictions are reasonably accurate, and the worst excesses they predict can be forestalled, I still see shoals ahead. The present century is the first to be confronted with a genuine population problem per se. In previous epochs an able-bodied man might be temporarily unemployed, but come the next plague, war, frontier or economic upturn he'd be needed once more. Now no longer; with improvements in public health, the end of even the Cold War, the closing of colonialism, and automation destroying jobs faster than either economic cycles or the shortening of the working day, week, year and lifetime can replace them, the marginal utility of human life has gone negative. New forms of employment are predicted, but they are few, and only for the very bright. We are coming to regard our fellows as vermin, an attitude already implicit in much green propaganda.

Nanotechnology will make this problem very much worse, very much quicker, and Drexler *et al.* are as much subject to such patterns of thought as anyone else. When they rejoice at the thought of manufacturing industry disappearing under the impact of nano-robots, and agricultural land being returned to wilderness thanks to nano pest-control, they are expressing the sort of distaste for the "too many" that first came to prominence among Edwardian parvenus. The vocabulary may have become more politically correct: the talk is less of *lebensraum*, more of "personal space"; less of good hunting country, more of unspoilt/restored wilderness. But what is being celebrated is the end of the proletariat, with its violence, its wage-claims, its nasty habits and above all its visibility. Well-a-day – the war isn't over, and I'm not counting chickens. But I'm grateful to this most enlightening book for telling me something of where the battle-lines will be drawn, and what the prizes will be.

(Chris Gilmore)

## Against the Big Bang Chris Gilmore

**W**ith *The Big Bang Never Happened* by Eric J. Lerner (Simon & Schuster, £10.99) the author's thesis is stated plainly in his title: he holds that the universe as we observe it is infinite in extent; has existed for at least two trillion years, probably forever; and will continue to exist indefinitely. Since his low estimate is three orders greater than any version of Big Bang currently allows, he fairly describes himself as embattled with the prevailing orthodoxy.

Yet it's been observed of all the hard sciences, most notably physics, that once any theory is positively supplanted (rather than swallowed whole) by a rival it's dead beyond recovery. The only exception I know is the Kant-Laplace theory of the formation of the Solar System, which made its comeback when Jeans's close-approach theory fell apart. An attempt to revive the steady state as propounded by Hoyle must therefore be treated with caution. Simon & Schuster express theirs by bringing this book out as a paperback original; Paul Davies, taking a philosophical stance directly opposed to Lerner's, got hardback, and the lion's share of the publicity.

Lerner begins with an overview of Big Bang as it currently stands. He makes a number of very cogent points, principally that on the very largest scales the universe seems not to be isotropic and that the various forms of "Dark Matter" – strings, axions, WIMPS and so forth – which have been posited to make its density conform to its observed expansion and presumed age are inelegant, ad hoc, unsupported by particle physics and do nothing whatever to beautify quantum theory. How much better, he exclaims, to embrace the Plasma Universe of Nobel Laureate Hannes Alfvén, to whom his book is dedicated.

To be accepted, any cosmological theory must leap three hurdles: account for the red shift of the distant galaxies; account for the universal background radiation discovered by Penzias and Wilson; and account for the present abundance of helium in the plenum. Lerner makes a reasonable case in terms of the latter two, but the only hypothesis he can advance for the first depends on our galaxy occupying a very specific position at the centre of a long-ago matter/anti-matter explosion, which propagated itself through the pre-existing void so as to look from here just as if space was expanding.

Feeling the need for an alternative, he suggests that "perhaps all objects, all space expands [sic] continuously,

a certain tiny percentage a year. Distant objects are redshifted, yet no real expansion takes place, since the density of everything remains the same." Since this special pleading is quite as inelegant as its own language (or anything postulated in Big Bang theory), and since despite his many references to an "evolving" universe he offers no idea of how it evolved into its base state of plasma field, or how long it will take to evolve back, one wonders why he bothered to advance it. We find out in Chapter 2.

**L**erner embarks on a breakneck unified history of the world, sounding a new low in crude historicism. All social, technical and philosophical movements are jammed a posteriori into "meaningful relationships" of increasing fatuity, of which this from page 101 is typical:

"The sphere of each planet," Rhäticus writes, "advanced uniformly with the motion assigned to it by nature and completed its period without being forced into any inequality by the power of the higher sphere." The equality under the law the commons fought for and the equality before God the Protestants asserted is reflected in the equality under the natural law of the heavens.

So now you know whom to blame for the Peasants' Revolt.

Lerner admits the influence of the Marxist historian V. Gordon Childe, but Childe was historian first, Marxist second. Lerner on social issues reads like Lancelot Hogben re-written by Harry Braverman. His emotional need for an increase universe becomes more blatant as the book progresses, so while his references to the scientifically unhealthy commitment of many cosmologists to the Big Bang have weight, they're entitled to a resounding et tu. Hoyle's feeble attempt to salvage the Steady State, by systematic (but undetectable) violation of the First Law of Thermodynamics, is hailed on page 145 as countering "one of the strongest arguments Gamow had brought forward," yet on page 161 some speculative applications of the Higgs field are dismissed as "theoretical fancy." But then, Lerner frequently expresses disesteem for the thermodynamic laws, to the extent of suggesting (on page 301) that the ultimate energy crisis will be resolved by the invention of what he is too coy to call a perpetual motion machine, but is instantly recognizable as such.

Such a gross display of double standards must alienate the general reader against Lerner's useful service in bringing forward the role of plasma physics in the formation of solar systems, galaxies and clusters. His suggestion that the vortex model of particle structure could be used to rid quantum theory of "renormalization" was also

new to me, and he writes convincingly about it. I noted, however, that these essentially small-scale effects are independent of cosmological theory.

Most dammingly of all, Lerner ignores the central philosophical problem of an increase, eternal universe. Having had infinite time, it must by definition have attained the highest possible level of development (this is implicit in the word possible). Since the universe is not at that level, it must have degenerated therefrom – specifically, into Alfvén's plasma cloud. So we're back with something so like the fluctuating Big Bang that the distinction is hardly worth drawing.

By claiming for Alfvén's theory the right to duck all the difficult questions, while mocking his rivals for failing to answer them, he does him no service, and I suspect displays his Marxist antecedents. Marxism was a "theory of everything," and Lerner's condemnation of rival theories and their proponents (especially Hawking) is fully explicable in Marxist terms.

Once long ago I saw a 19th-century cartoon of a man on a downward staircase from light into darkness. The top riser was labelled "Darwinism"; the bottom, "Atheism." I think Lerner would re-draw that cartoon, with the Big Bang on the top riser, theism about three quarters down, and on the bottom a morass of chattel slavery and human sacrifice. In his hysterical terror at such a prospect, he has converted what might have been a short but worthwhile book into this half-baked brick of crypto-politics tended by pseudo-science.

(Chris Gilmore)

## UK Books Received April 1992

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Alderman, Gill. **The Land Beyond**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21368-6, 306pp., paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Gwyneth Jones in Interzone 45.) 23rd April 1992.

Aldiss, Brian W. **Dracula Unbound**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21193-4, 249pp., paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 48.) 23rd April 1992.

Anthony, Piers. **Question Quest**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-55360-4, 359pp., hardcover, £15.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; 14th in the "Xanth" series.) 16th April 1992.

Anthony, Piers. **Unicorn Point**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-55202-0, 305pp., paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first pub-

lished in the USA, 1989; an "Apprentice Adept" book; it contains a brief Author's Note in which he explains that "there have never been Author's Notes in the Adept series.") 16th April 1992.

Appleby, Brian. **Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man**. Pan/Picador, ISBN 0-330-32012-2, 283pp., hardcover, £14.99. (Popular science text, first edition; billed as "the first major attack on the faith of our age," it comes with advance raves from people as diverse as novelist Peter Ackroyd, psychologist Oliver Sacks, Gaia-james Lovelock and comedian John Sessions; there's some passing mention of what the author is pleased to call "sci-fi.") 8th May 1992.

Asimov, Isaac. **Atom: Journey Across the Subatomic Cosmos**. Illustrated by D.F. Bach. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-1051-0, 319pp., paperback, £5.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1991.) 7th May 1992.

Atwood, Margaret. **Conversations**. Edited by Earl G. Ingersoll. Introduction by Philip Howard. Virago, ISBN 1-85381-511-X, 265pp., paperback, £7.99. (Collection of interviews with a major Canadian novelist and poet, author of the sf novel *The Handmaid's Tale* [1985]; first published in the USA, 1990; Howard's introduction is new to this edition.) 14th May 1992.

Brooke, Keith. **Expatria**. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13725-1, 318pp., paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 55.) 21st May 1992.

Card, Orson Scott. **Maps in a Mirror: The Short Fiction of Orson Scott Card**, Volumes One & Two. Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-988470-4 & 480-1, 552pp & 522pp, paperbacks, £4.99 each. (Sf/fantasy collections, first published in the USA as one volume, 1990; reviewed by John Clute in Interzone 44.) 7th May 1992.

Chalker, Jack L. **Children of Flux & Anchor: Soul Rider, Book Five**. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-012318-0, 350pp., paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 30th April 1992.

Conrad, Peter. **Underworld**. Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-3895-5, 252pp., hardcover, £14.99. (Mainstream novel which seems to have sf elements; first edition; it's described by the publishers as "a profound and enthralling adventure story of the imagination"; the Australian-born author is best known for his non-fiction works such as *The Victorian Treasure-House and Imagining America*; this is his first novel.) 9th April 1992.

Davenport, Emily. **Shade**. Women's Press, ISBN 0-7043-1286-7, 246pp., paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1991; a debut book by an American author.) April 1992.

Duane, Diane. **The Door Into Sunset**. "Volume three of the epic *Tales of the Five*." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13638-8, 384pp., paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition [?].) 21st May 1992.

Feist, Raymond E., and Janney Wurts. **Mistress of the Empire**. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-246-13355-4, 560pp., hardcover, £14.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Doughter of the Empire* and *Servant of the Empire*; last issue, we erroneously listed a proof copy of the American printing as the first, but in fact that is not due out until 15th June, over a month after this British edition.) 7th May 1992.

Fowler, Christopher. **Red Bride**. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-356-20666-1, 424pp., hardcover, £14.99. (Horror novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 30th April 1992.

Gallagher, Stephen. **The Boat House**. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-56244-1, 333pp., paperback, £4.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first published in 1991.) 23rd April 1992.

Geo, Maggie. **Where are the Snows**. Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10244-9, 377pp., paperback, £5.99. (Sf [?] novel, first published in 1991; a tale of sex and hedonism set in the near future.) 30th April 1992.

Gregory, Philippa. **The Wise Woman**. Viking, ISBN 0-670-84368-7, 502pp., hardcover, £14.99. (Historical novel about witchcraft, first edition; it's not clear to us whether this book has any fantasy element, but it could perhaps be loosely classified as "horror"; the British author is hitherto best known for her romantic historicals.) 18th May 1992.

Havoc, James. **Satanskin**. Creation Press [83 Clerkenwell Rd., London EC1M 5RJ], ISBN 1-871592-10-0, unpaginated [about 120pp], paperback, £5.95. (Horror/fantasy collection, first edition; it's described as containing "surrealistic black fantasy fables which disclose an occult world of sex, magick, lunar mutiny, extremal monomality, in utero lycanthropy, sadomasochistic vampirism, oneritic post mortem malediction, and other bizarre manias"; covet lector.) 30th April 1992.

Hawking, Stephen, ed. **Stephen Hawking's A Brief History of Time: A Reader's Companion**. Prepared by Gene Stone. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-02510-5, 194pp., hardcover, £16.99. (Illustrated guidebook to the life and work of the great cosmologist; it has been published to coincide with Errol Morris's documentary film.) 1st May 1992.

Hegarty, Frances. **The Playroom**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-014544-3, 385pp., paperback, £4.99. (Psychological horror novel, first published in 1991; the author has also written several crime novels as "Frances Fyfield.") 30th April 1992.

Holdstock, Robert. **The Bone Forest**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21292-2, 268pp., paperback, £4.50. (Fantasy collection, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 51.) 7th May 1992.

Hudson, J. Francis. **Rabshakeh**. Lion, ISBN 0-7459-2267-8, 320pp., paperback, £5.99. (Historical fantasy [?] novel, first edition; it's a retelling of the Old Testament story of Saul, packaged to look like heroic fantasy.) 24th April 1992.

Hunter, Jack, ed. **Red Stains**. Creation Press [83 Clerkenwell Rd., London EC1M 5RJ], ISBN 1-871592-08-9, 137pp., paperback, £5.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; it contains mainly original stories by Ramsey Campbell, James Havoc, D.F. Lewis and many others whose names are unfamiliar to us; it's described as an "unofficial sequel to 1989's *Block Book*," and a note in the end-pages states that "Red Stains is to continue in magazine form... from autumn 1992 – it promises to be the most provocative literary journal currently published in this country; the only one to fully explore the darkest, most forbidden recesses of the psycho-sexual imagination.") 30th April 1992.

Huysmans, J.K. **La-Bas (Down There)**. Introduction by Robert Irwin. Dedalus, ISBN 0-946626-85-5, 291pp., trade paperback, £7.99. (Literary horror novel, first published in France, 1891; this appears to be the first English translation of 1925; no translator's name is given.) 7th May 1992.

Ings, Simon. **Hot Head**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21496-8, 300pp., paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first edition; a debut book by a new British writer whose short stories have appeared rather sparsely in Interzone, REM and elsewhere.) 7th May 1992.

Jacobson, Mark. *Gojiro*. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-15806-5, 356pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (SF/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this is a "slipstream" oddity which appears to be all about the great green Japanese monster known in the west as Godzilla.) 30th April 1992.

Lackey, Mercedes. *Magic's Pawn: Book One of The Last Herald Mage*. Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-14-016751-X, 358pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 30th April 1992.

La Plante, Richard. *Manus*. Little, Brown, ISBN 0-356-17891-9, 358pp, hardcover, £13.99. (Horror/suspense novel, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen]; this is the third novel, described as a "psychothriller," by a martial-arts expert who happens to be married to bestselling novelist Lynda La Plante; his previous two were fantasies in the "Tegne" series.) 11th June 1992.

Len, Stanislaw. *The Investigation*. Translated by Adele Milch. Deutsch, ISBN 0-233-98772-X, 216pp, hardcover, £12.99. (SF/mystery novel, first published in Poland, 1959; this English translation appears to date from 1974.) 9th April 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Moon. *Generation Warriors: Volume Three of The Planet Pirates*. Macdonald/Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-004-3, 345pp, hardcover, £13.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1991.) 26th April 1992.

McCaffrey, Anne, and Jody Lynn Nye. *The Death of Sleep: Volume Two of The Planet Pirates*. Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-005-1, 300pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 26th April 1992.

McKillip, Patricia A. *The Sorceress and the Cygnet*. Pan, ISBN 0-330-31839-X, 242pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in Interzone 51.) 8th May 1992.

Massie, Elizabeth. *Sineater*. Pan, ISBN 0-330-32122-6, 332pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first edition; a debut book by a new writer who has already had some success with short stories.) 8th May 1992.

Morwood, Peter. *Firebird*. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-4705-8, 308pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to Prince Ivon; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen].) April 1992.

Newman, Kim. *Bad Dreams*. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21366-X, 317pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 43.) 23rd April 1992.

Paxson, Diana [L.] *The Wind Crystal*. "Book Five of The Chronicles of Westria." Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-430-56250-6, 308pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1990.) 7th May 1992.

Piercy, Marge. *Body of Glass*. Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-7181-3537-7, 406pp, hardcover, £14.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA as He, She and It, 1991; by the author of Women on the Edge of Time [1976], this new book is set in 21st-century America and it seems to involve the Jewish legend of the Golem; in her "Acknowledgments," Piercy says: "I enjoy William Gibson very much, and have freely borrowed from his inventions and those of other cyberpunk writers.") 23rd April 1992.

Pratchett, Terry. *Reaper Man*. "A Discworld Novel." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13464-3, 287pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 51.) 21st May 1992.

Roszak, Theodore. *Flicker*. "Sunset Boulevard meets The Name of the Rose." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-40480-6, 672pp, paperback, £6.99. (Horror/mystery novel, first published in the USA, 1991; this bears some coincidental resemblance to Ramsey Campbell's Ancient Images [1989] in that it is a fictional "journey into Hollywood's own heart of darkness, where nothing on the silver screen is ever quite what it appears"; as for the Umberto Eco comparison, it's more like Foucault's Pendulum than The Name of the Rose; the author, who remains best known for his non-fiction, such as *The Making of a Counterculture*, has written at least one of novel in the past.) 9th April 1992.

Sheekley, Robert. *Immortality Inc.* "Basis for the film Freejack." Arrow/Legend, ISBN 0-09-915741-1, 240pp, paperback, £3.99. (SF novel, first published in the USA, 1959.) 7th May 1992.

Silberg, Robert. *Valentine Pontifex*. Pan, ISBN 0-330-28707-9, 367pp, paperback, £4.99. (SF/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1983; third in the "Majipoor" trilogy.) 8th May 1992.

Simmons, Dan. *The Hollow Man*. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-7940-3, 312pp, hardcover, £15.99. (SF/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1992; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 12th November 1992.

Straub, Peter. *Houses Without Doors*. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-21202-7, 448pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 1990.) 23rd April 1992.

Wynne-Jones, Tim. *Voices*. Hodder/NEL, ISBN 0-450-56249-2, 312pp, paperback, £4.99. (Horror novel, first published in Canada, 1988; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in Interzone 39.) 7th May 1992.

## Overseas Books Received

Ashwell, Pauline. *Unwillingly to Earth*. Tor, ISBN 0-812-51929-2, 280pp, paperback, \$3.99. (SF novel, first edition; proof copy received; a first novel by a little-known British writer; the publicity letter states: "Pauline Ashwell, as you probably know, is the pseudonym of Pauline Whibley, who also writes sf as 'Paul Ash.' Under both names, she has been a staple of Astounding/Analog since the late fifties"; no, we didn't know that, although we vaguely recall a "Paul Ash" story appearing in one of Amis & Conquest's Spectrum anthologies of the 1960s.) August 1992.

Barton, William. *Dark Sky Legion: An Ahrimanic Novel*. Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29616-7, 404pp, paperback, \$4.99. (SF novel, first edition.) August 1992.

Dowling, Terry. *Blue Tyson*. Introduction by Jack Vance. Aphelion Publications [PO Box 619, North Adelaide, SA 5006, Australia], ISBN 1-875346-05-8, 238pp, paperback, AS12.95. (SF collection, first edition; available direct from the publishers by airmail, postage free, anywhere in the world, for US\$10; a third book by an Australian writer whose previous titles are *Rynoseros* and *Wormwood*.) No publication date shown, received in April 1992.

Zoosho, Gardner, ed. *The Year's Best Science Fiction, Ninth Annual Collection*. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-07889-7, 570pp, \$27.95. (SF anthology, first edition; proof copy received, among many other 1991 stories, it contains three selections from the pages of Interzone: "Blood Sisters" by Greg Egan, "Gene Wars" by Paul J. McAuley and "La Macchina" by Chris Beckett.) July 1992.

Hall, Hal W. *Science Fiction and Fantasy Book Review Index: Volume 19, 1988*. SFBR [3608 Meadow Oaks Lane, Bryan, Texas 77802, USA], ISBN 0-935064-23-0, 87pp, paperback, \$10. (Index of reviews of sf books which have appeared in a wide range of sf and general periodicals; first edition publication of this useful annual has been running late, alas.) No publication date shown, received in April 1992.

Kerr, Katherine. *A Time of Omens: A Novel of the Westlands*. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-08913-7, 401pp, hardcover, \$22. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1992; sequel to *A Time of Exile* in the "Westlands Cycle"; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous trade paperback edition [not seen].) 15th July 1992.

Knight, Dan. *An R.A. Lafferty Checklist*. New edition. "Drumm Booklet #38." Chris Drumm [PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226, USA], ISBN 0-936055-50-2, 28pp, paperbound, \$3.50. (Bibliography of the leading sf/fantasy writer; the date of the first edition is not stated.) No date shown: April 1992?

Lafferty, R.A. *Grasshoppers & Wild Honey, Chapters 1 & 2 (1928-1942)*. In a Green Tree - Part 2. Drumm Booklet #39." Chris Drumm [PO Box 445, Polk City, Iowa 50226, USA], ISBN 0-936055-51-0, 66pp, paperbound, \$4.50. (Booklet containing two chapters of a hitherto unpublished non-sf novel by a leading sf/fantasy writer; first edition; this work, when complete, will constitute part two of the tetralogy *In a Green Tree*; the first novel in the sequence, *My Heart Leaps Up*, was published by Drumm some years ago as five booklets.) No date shown: April 1992?

Lafferty, R.A. *Tales of Chicago: More Than Melchisedech, Book One*. Illustrations by R. Ward Shipman. United Mythologies Press [Box 390, Station A Weston, Ontario M9N 3N1, Canada], ISBN 0-921322-26-7, 110pp, hardcover, US\$19.95. (Fantasy novel; first edition; there is a simultaneous 50-copy signed limited edition [not seen]; this book is described by the publisher as the first part of "the massive More Than Melchisedech...the crown to Lafferty's Argo Myths cycle"; parts two and three, *Toles of Midnight* and *Argo*, are to follow from this same small press; other novels in the cycle, already published, include *The Devil is Dead* and *Archipelego*; if you are confused by Lafferty's labyrinthine bibliography, well so are many people; see the Dan Knight booklet, listed above, for assistance.) No date shown: April 1992?

Lumley, Brian. *Blood Brothers*. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85357-2, 408pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; the latest in Lumley's "Narcosope" series, and apparently the first to appear in hardcover.) July 1992.

McMullen, Sean. *Call to the Edge*. Introduction by Michael J. Tolley. Aphelion Publications [PO Box 619, North Adelaide, SA 5006, Australia], ISBN 1-875346-06-6, 245pp, paperback, AS12.95. (SF collection, first edition; available direct from the publishers by airmail, postage free, anywhere in the world, for US\$10; a debut book by an Australian writer who had a story in Interzone 59.) No publication date shown, received in April 1992.

May, Julian. *Blood Trillium*. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-08851-3, 394pp, hardcover, \$20. (Fantasy novel, first edition; sequel to *Black Trillium* by Marion Bradley, Julian May and Andre Norton; in addition to her sf and fantasy novels Julian May "has also written more than 200 books for young readers on such topics as science, natural history, art, and biography" - so it says here.) 15th July 1992.

Modestov, L.E., Jr. **The Magic of Recluse**. Tor, ISBN 0-812-850518-2, 501pp, paperback, \$4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1991; reviewed by Wendy Bradley in Interzone 51.) May 1992.

Modestov, L.E., Jr. **The Towers of the Sunset**. Tor, ISBN 0-312-85297-5, 359pp, hardcover, \$21.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; follow-up to *The Magic of Recluse*, in one of those accompanying publicity letters which prove so eminently quotable, editor David Hartwell claims: "Modestov writes with the logic of a good science-fiction writer, and the ear of a poet, in often metrical prose.") August 1992.

Peake, Mervyn. **Gormenghast**. Illustrated by the author. Introduction by Quentin Crisp. Overlook Press [Lewis Hollow Rd., Woodstock, NY 12498, USA], ISBN 0-87951-426-4, 409pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1950; a masterpiece, reissued in a handsome new edition with the two companion volumes [see below].) 4th May 1992.

Peake, Mervyn. **Titus Alone**. Illustrated by the author. Critical section edited by G. Peter Winnington. Overlook Press [Lewis Hollow Rd., Woodstock, NY 12498, USA], ISBN 0-87951-425-6, 363pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1959; this edition follows the 1970 revised text; the last 150 pages of the volume are given over to a selection of "Critical Assessments" which look to be a valuable resource for information and opinion on Peake's great works.) 4th May 1992.

Peake, Mervyn. **Titus Groan**. Illustrated by the author. Introduction by Anthony Burgess. Overlook Press [Lewis Hollow Rd., Woodstock, NY 12498, USA], ISBN 0-87951-425-6, 396pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the UK, 1946; very highly recommended.) 4th May 1992.

Powers, Tim. **Last Call**. Morrow, ISBN 0-688-10732-X, 479pp, hardcover, \$23. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; it's described in the blurb as "a masterpiece of magical realism.") 20th April 1992.

Resnick, Mike. **Will the Last Person to Leave the Planet Please Shut Off the Sun?** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85276-2, 353pp, hardcover, \$18.95. (SF collection, first edition; proof copy received; this is Resnick's first collection [small-press items apart] and it contains a slightly puzzled introduction by the author in which he says that after writing zillions of novels and disdaining short fiction he woke up one day to discover that he was after all an award-winning short-story writer.) August 1992.

Vonarburg, Elisabeth. **The Silent City**. Translated by Jane Brierley. Bantam Spectra, ISBN 0-553-29789-9, 261pp, paperback, \$4.99. (SF novel, first published in France, 1981; this translation first published in Canada, 1988; proof copy received; the UK Women's Press edition of 1990 was reviewed by Paul McAuley in Interzone 39.) August 1992.

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This issue's Small Ads and "Coming Next Month" box appear on page 58.

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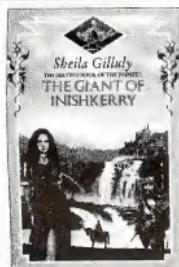
## FOR SALE

**The Ultimate Guide to Science Fiction** by David Pringle (with assistance from Ken Brown). Hard-cover edition, Grafton, 1990. A guide to some 3,000 sf titles, described by the *Oxford Times* as "among the four or five most useful books published in this field in the last two decades." It sold quite well and there are just a few copies left. We are selling these to IZ readers at less than half the original price of £16.95 – £8 inc. p & p (£10 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

**Interzone: The 2nd Anthology**. Paperback edition, New English Library, 1988. Stories by J.G. Ballard, Gregory Benford, Thomas M. Disch, Garry Kilworth, Paul J. McAuley, Kim Newman, Rachel Pollack, John Shirley & Bruce Sterling, Brian Stablesford, Ian Watson and others – fine tales which the *Times* described as having "the quality of going right to the edge of ideas which can chill as well as warm." It's now officially out of print, but we have obtained some remainder copies for resale to IZ readers at just over half the original cover price – £1.75 (including postage & packing; £2.75 overseas; \$5 USA).

**Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard's Four-Dimensional Nightmare**. A monograph by David Pringle, Borgo Press, 1979. Covers all Ballard's work from "The Violent Noon" in 1951 up to the eve of publication of *The Unlimited Dream Company* in 1979. Still in print in the USA but long hard to obtain in Britain. Now copies are available from Interzone at £3.50 each (including postage & packing; £4.50 overseas; this offer not available to USA).

For any or all of these items please send a cheque or postal order for the appropriate amount to: Interzone, 217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, UK. You may also pay by Access (MasterCard) or Visa card: please send us your card-holder's name, address, card expiry date and signature.



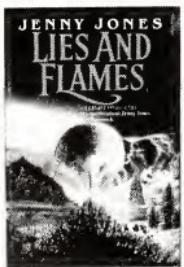
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<sup>1</sup> Locus Nov. 1989; <sup>2</sup> Locus Feb. 1990; <sup>3</sup> Locus Feb. 1991



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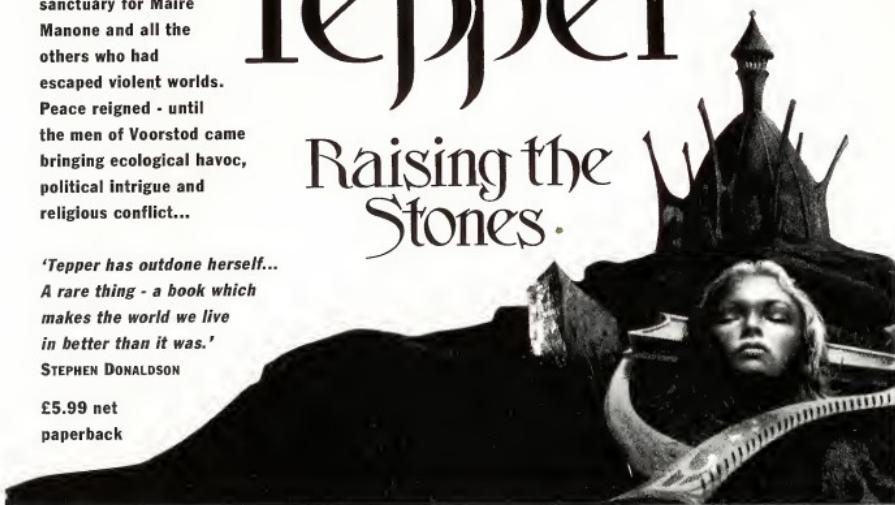
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